

Sermon 13th after Trinity 2007
Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16
Luke 14; 1, 7-14

The rooms are booked but are the guests coming?

‘The rooms are booked but are the guests coming?’ So began an editorial in the church press recently. In my study I have a bookmark which I keep in whatever church related book I’m reading at the time. On it appears this prayer –
Bless this holy meeting. Make it a base for mission and ministry. Make it a base for peace and unity. Make it a base for grace and generosity. Make it a base for holiness and hospitality.

The bookmark was that produced for the last Lambeth Conference in 1998. I’m not quite sure how I got hold of it! But when I re-read that prayer the other day in the light of all that has gone on in the Anglican Communion during the ensuing years, I wondered what might have happened to the hopes of the bishops and others who’d gathered at Canterbury on that occasion. Peace and unity, generosity, hospitality.

There are several themes running strongly through both today’s readings that have a very direct bearing on the church and how it lives its life. ‘Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.’

When we think of strangers our natural instinct may be to think, not only of people we don’t know, but also perhaps of people from other cultures or faith backgrounds and so for us to read ‘do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers’ feels inclusive and something that embraces all people. So it can be a bit shocking to realise that, in the letter to the Hebrews, the meaning of ‘strangers’ is almost certainly limited to ‘other Christians’. But those strangers were Christians who, though not physically related and not knowing each other as they came from far flung communities, nevertheless saw themselves as brothers and sisters. They were to offer each other hospitality as they moved from place to place.

That may sound quite limiting and restrictive to us and not really very friendly or inclusive but it is a common human characteristic to choose to mix mainly with people like ourselves and that was something that the Pharisees practised ‘par excellence’. Indeed, they’d made a spiritual principle of refusing social contact with people who didn’t share their standards of piety. So Jesus steps in with the parable of the wedding banquet to warn them that, when they give a meal they shouldn’t invite their friends or relations or neighbours as a sort of mutual benefit society but instead should spread their invitation much more widely. To the people they don’t know and who would never be able to return their hospitality. Whatever earthly satisfaction the Pharisees might have got from offering hospitality to their cronies they were missing out on the heavenly blessedness of the possibility of entertaining angels.

There’s also a part of us that finds it easier to get on with strangers than with those we know really well. We may be on our best behaviour with outsiders whereas we shed our inhibitions and feel able to behave less well, at times anyway, with those we are closest to. Parents see that when their children behave rudely towards them but delightfully in the company of others. And it feels as if there’s something of that going on in the church at the moment. There’s just under a year to go now to the next

Lambeth Conference but it often seems as if we're much more comfortable relating to Christians of other denominations or to people of other faiths than we are to our fellow Anglicans to whom we often seem to be incredibly rude or unkind.

The spats and denunciations, the claims of moral and spiritual superiority, the refusal of some of the church's leaders to meet or sit down with one another are becoming ever more public. And what an earth is that saying about the church to the world?

This autumn, Giles Fraser, a rector in Putney who also teaches philosophy and is a commentator on church life is coming to St Martin's to speak in our education series. Giles has strong views on almost everything and can be rather outspoken so he's always good value to listen to! He made an interesting point recently. With reference to the situation in Israel/Palestine, when commenting on the fact that the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee has issued advice that the government ought to be talking to Hamas. What they actually said was 'we recommend that Tony Blair should engage with Hamas in order to facilitate reconciliation amongst Palestinians'.

As Giles points out, this is risky talk because Hamas has been responsible for encouraging suicide bomb attacks against Israel, but he commends it because it's that sort of risky talk that may lead to peace as, for example, in Northern Ireland. We can't achieve peace without a willingness to meet together and talk – we can see that for ourselves in the world around us.

So, the rooms are booked but are the guests coming? Now, a small group of bishops have indicated that they intend to refuse the invitation and a rather wider group is publicly sitting on the fence and toying with the idea of not coming – the idea that they might refuse to sit down and talk to other bishops. As Giles reminds us, there have been people of great courage in a number of countries who have been prepared to sit down with people who have murdered those closest to them in a search for peace and reconciliation but yet some bishops threaten not to meet others because they disagree about theology.

'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.' The bishops who are considering turning down the invitation will surely be losing out on a precious possibility – not only for themselves but for the whole church. It feels as if, perhaps unconsciously, they're actually acting out something of the spirit of the parable that follows on immediately from this morning's reading about where we sit when we're invited to God's banquet and that's the parable of the great dinner – about whether we accept the invitation or not. But at least the guests in Jesus' example seem to have been reasonably polite, although not perhaps completely honest, in making their excuses for non-attendance – land to see, oxen to try out or a new wife to return to.

That invitation was to a heavenly banquet. Now, the Lambeth Conference might not quite qualify as a heavenly banquet but, nonetheless, the point of the parable is that, though some think they prize the thought of sharing in God's kingdom very highly, they may actually be rejecting appeals to act in a way that makes it a possibility in the here and now.

Who is modelling the Christian life and, in particular, the life of the church for us? There's a lot of wisdom in the Letter to the Hebrews and it feels like quite a good book for the 21st century and for church life in the 21st century.

‘Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers’. ‘remember those who are in prison, those who are being tortured.’ ‘Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have’. ‘Continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God.’ ‘Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have.’

The idea of hospitality to strangers because we may be entertaining angels without knowing it stretches way back into the OT – to the story of Abraham and Sarah when, as Abraham sat at the entrance to his tent in the midday heat, he looked up, and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them he instantly ran to meet them, thought clearly they were strangers to him, and he bowed down to the ground and said ‘ My Lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought and wash your feet and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread that you may refresh yourselves.’ And then, far from producing just a little bread he goes into the tent to find Sarah and asks her to make cakes on a scale that would have filled a shop window plus a calf and curds and milk. Those strangers were divine beings. We’re not told that Abraham initially recognised them as such but yet he responded as if in that knowledge. What an opportunity Lambeth could provide to serve each other and the world.

Hebrews paints a picture of an integrated Christian life – of their being no separation between worship and practical Christian living. Praise, kindness and sharing are all described as sacrifice ‘ Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.’

And, among all our human failings we’re offered a wonderful verse, deep in the midst of the reading. A verse to hold before us. ‘Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday and today and forever.’