

You can learn a lot at a meal. Eating together reveals people's preferences, their physical make up (I have a friend who, when filling in the bit of the form which says 'dietary requirements' always puts 'haggis' - but some foods are dangerous to people), their style. Some people treat food simply as fuel, for others it's art and culture. Restaurants work on their 'feel' as well as their menu. When you go to eat at someone's house, or they come to you, how the event is set up says a lot about you and them. The way you eat in a community says a lot too, though I always found silent breakfast at theological college a bit of a trial. I have a Facebook friend who will not become friends with anyone unless he has eaten a meal with them. You can learn a lot at a meal.

Perhaps that is why Luke the Evangelist depicts Jesus at lots of dinners, and why he sets Jesus's teaching and ministry in that context. I'm told there are 19 meals in Luke, 13 of which are unique to his account. Luke 14 is told by Luke as if it's one meal, but it may well be a gathering together of a number of them. When Jesus ate with people, more was remembered than what they ate. When we eat together we communicate far more than what we say, and in these meal stories much is to be found about how the Kingdom of God works.

In this chapter Jesus has already used the way that the guests assembled at the meal to teach them a lesson about humility. They had been jostling for a place near the top. Jesus told them to start at the bottom. A simple lesson about feeling better when you are promoted rather than demoted takes on a whole new meaning when we apply it to the way we act as Christians in a world obsessed with success and prestige. Our place is at the bottom, not the top. Having been given everything by God, we don't need to claim a prestigious slot in the gatherings we go to. There are greater things at stake.

Our reading begins with the next lesson Jesus teaches. The theme follows on, and is about the motivations for the guests you invite. Jesus challenges his hearers that if the invitation is about what it will do for you - either by gaining credit by having someone prestigious, or by using an invitation to engineer a reciprocal invitation round to their place - then you will already have had your reward. Jesus says that if you invite someone who will do your reputation no good, or who can't repay you by an invitation in return, then you will gain much greater credit in heaven. Do notice Jesus's exaggerated style here. He's not saying 'don't ever invite your friends'. He's saying that 'if you invite your friends, then how much more should you invite people you wouldn't normally expect to invite'.

The theme of invitation continues, with the story of the invitations to dinner which are refused. Again, there is much exaggeration for effect here. Look, says Jesus, at the host, who aches to be generous, and at the refuseniks, and their arrogance, apathy, self obsession, and sheer ignorance. Jesus doesn't go into the exact reasons why they say 'no'. What he is clear about is that the invitation is extended to all, and that those who do come might, in the end, be quite surprised at who they sit down at the table with. Our host is so generous that it is possible to refuse the invitation. And our host's grace is such that even the least likely will end up sitting at a feast.

It doesn't take much reflection to see this as God's call to us to answer the invitation, and to extend that invitation to others. Many have seen in this parable a challenge to Jesus's Jewish hearers, keen to 'fence their table', but at the same time unwilling to hear God's call for themselves. The early church heard this as a call to welcome the Gentiles as well as the Jews. We can hear it is a call to ensure that we have received the love of God – we have accepted our invitation - and to extend that not just to those we think will fit, but to all, and not to give up until all have been invited in a way which makes sense to them.

There is much that is practical here about the way we make food available to those who have little. There is much that is challenging here about the way we welcome and invite, to ensure that we are not just replicating ourselves, but genuinely making the love of God open to all. There is a challenge, smack between the eyes, about whether we are inviting anyone at all, or just hoping that the reputation of the church will do it for us, as if all a restaurant has to do is open its windows and let the smell attract people. Restaurateurs know that they have to do much more than that, and so do we. And there is a clear call to be humble, to get over ourselves, and genuinely to seek the lowest place and offer the higher places to others.

How we eat together speaks of how we live together, and relate to each other. If the food is good here, and the atmosphere is genuinely enriching, what's stopping you inviting others to enjoy it? Or do you want all the food for yourself?