

Trinity 13 29th August 2010

Ecclus 10:12-18 Heb 13:1-8, 15-16 Luke 14:1,7-14

Well it's lovely to be back here at St Marys on a Sunday...the first time for 5 weeks! I've missed being here. As well as having a lovely 2 week holiday in France I have, though, been working (!) – in the parish on weekdays and taking services for the last couple of Sundays in St Albans and at Arkley, where vacancies or clergy holidays meant they needed extra help.

But it's been good to have some time off and I hope many of you have likewise had some great holidays.

Over the last few weeks I've found time to re-watch the whole of the BBC adaptation of Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice* – all six hour-long episodes of it! Putting Colin Firth's scene as Mr Darcy emerging wet from the lake to one side(!)(..otherwise there's no way of getting through this sermon!!), I was reminded as I watched of just how stratified society was at the beginning of the C19th. Where one was in the social hierarchy was known and taken with utmost seriousness by all levels of society and determined who one mixed with, met and even married. Such a set up lead to extreme amounts of pride and prejudice. Mr Darcy's character is perhaps the most extreme in outward appearance of pride, and yet as the film goes on it is clear that his pride is more aloofness and a direct honesty rather than arrogance or unkindness. So Elizabeth Bennett's prejudice against him gradually softens as she understands him better, and his prejudice against those of lower class crumbles as love of Lizzie takes hold.

Other much more seemingly humble characters on the outside however turn out to be much prouder, exclusive and more entrenched inside, and therefore become thoroughly disagreeable. I'm thinking particularly of Mr Collins, the obsequious clergyman cousin of the Bennet family. He is so overwhelmed by social position that he is both horrifically condescending to those beneath him and utterly creepy and crawling with those above him such as Lady Catherine de Berg. He is obsessed by the size of the house and estate people live in and by the wealth of their possessions. He, almost more than any character in the film, is immersed in pride.

Obviously our society in 21st Britain has moved on immeasurably from that of Jane Austin's day...and yet we still live in a very divided society where whole swathes and groups never meet and have no idea or understanding of one another. Now happily not divided by old fashioned class barriers (which was even still the case when the Frost Report did their famous sketch 'I know my place'), nevertheless there are many other entrenched divisions some of which are becoming stronger rather than weaker – racial ghettos, poverty pockets and areas of disadvantage exist in cities and in whole regions of the country; the gap between the wealthiest and poorest is growing rather than narrowing, and the gap between north and south likewise is getting larger; those with homes rarely know those without. Many of our secondary schools are drawing from an increasingly small section of society as wealthier families move into catchments of the so called better schools leaving sink areas and failing schools. It is easy to find ourselves moving in smaller and smaller circles and being completely out of touch with everyone else!

But this is not God's vision for our world. This is not how his kingdom is organised! This is not God's way! All three readings set for today look at the issues of pride and humility, community and service from God's point of view and they turn the world's conventional wisdom upside down.

The Old Testament patriarchs and prophets new of the relationship between pride and sin, rightly understanding human pride as being a huge barrier in our relationship with God. The opening verse in our first reading is typical in this regard: "the beginning of pride is to forsake the Lord; the heart has withdrawn from its maker" (v12).

This sort of pride, the sort that cuts us off from God because we think we can manage on our own with no reference to a higher power; that we are strong and capable in our own strength; that we won't make mistakes or don't have to answer to our creator and judge; - this sort of pride certainly breaks our individual spiritual connection with God. And throughout history religious leaders and teachers have sought to urge humility before God as the starting point of our very being. We need to acknowledge God as creator and Lord of our universe, and as Lord in our own lives, to whom we can come regularly on our knees in praise and confession, and from whom we may receive comfort, strength and guidance throughout our lives. Jesus spoke about this on many occasions urging us to be like little children - open, dependant, eager and vulnerable.

Pride certainly has no place in our relationship with God.

But what is even more apparent in the other readings this morning, and particularly in our Gospel reading, is that not only should pride be eliminated if our relationship with God is to flourish, but that pride also needs to be controlled in our relationships with one another. We need humility between ourselves if we are to be God's community and kingdom, representing his values and wisdom.

In our Gospel reading Jesus is attending a meal in the home of one of the leaders of the Pharisees and he is being carefully watched to see how he behaves. Jesus directs his teaching to the two groups who are gathered -the guests and the host himself.

The guests are all jockeying for position towards the head of the table, towards the privileged end which carries more honour and status. Jesus speaks to them on two levels. On the surface he reminds them of the dangers of pride coming before a fall. How much worse would it be to be told to move down the table than to be asked to 'move up higher'! In all our social dealings with one another we should not think of ourselves more highly than we ought (to quote from St Paul 50 years later!), but we need to be prepared to take to lowest, most insignificant position. We need to be prepared not to be noticed, to be thought of as worthless, to be ignored and passed over. Jesus was talking into a domestic situation of a meal, but he is also talking into so many situations in our lives today: in our work, in our church lives, in the community. This is really countercultural and just as radical as it was in Jesus day. With so much emphasis in our own culture on celebrity and seeking fame and wealth, seeking to be ignored and unnoticeable, seeking to serve rather than be served, seeking to be last rather than first....this is radical. This is the topsy-turvy world of the Kingdom of God that God in Christ calls us to embrace.

But Jesus is also speaking at another level in pointing out that it is up the host to determine the places. Here he is wanting them, and us, to think ahead to the final banquet in heaven where it will be God who seats us all around him. Only he can and will judge and reward us. It will not be in our hands as to where we seat.

But we will all be invited; we can be certain of that; we all have been invited to that final banquet in heaven. This is the point of Jesus second teaching directed in today's gospel towards the host. He ticks off the Pharisee for only inviting people of status and importance, wealth and influence, partly so he could 'network' (to use a modern expression) and be invited back. But Jesus urges him, and us today, to look first to those who are marginalised, those that the world forgets, those who are ignored or trampled on.

In this he is reminding us to live in an inclusive, open community, ready to welcome any who come our way whatever their status or wealth.

This is our calling as individuals and as a community, his church. And is a constant challenge in our discipleship.

But just as when speaking to the guest Jesus was speaking on two levels, so he is here too when speaking to the host. Again Jesus is pointing to the great wedding feast in heaven when our outward appearances, worldly status and wealth will count for nothing. He reminds us the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

And as with all Jesus parables Jesus doesn't just use words. He *is* the actual parable of this himself – embodying this radical, upside-down, reversal of God's wisdom and desire. God himself came to earth in the person of his son, to seek and save the lost. 'He emptied himself' is how that great hymn in Philippians puts it. Jesus was born in a stable to a young, simple peasant girl. He grew up in the household of a labourer in the backwater of Galilee, unnoticed, unremarkable. Later he lived an itinerant life seeking to serve those on the edge of society, the untouchables and the disregarded. He was prepared to suffer and die to bring life and light into the world and to display the overwhelming generous love of God for all.

This is our God and this is our calling.

Some words of St Paul to end with:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness,
and being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above all names,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. Amen.