

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 1st September 2019

Luke 14: 1, 7 - 14

Mary Beard is a Professor of Classics at Cambridge - and probably one of Britain's best-known T.V. historians. She has presented programmes on the BBC in particular, such as *Pompeii: Life and Death in a Roman Town*, *Meet the Romans with Mary Beard*, and *Julius Caesar Revealed*.

In 2015 she published a comprehensive history of ancient Rome called *SPQR* covering, of course, the period when Jesus lived, and when Christianity first emerged within the Roman Empire. Writing about the life-experiences of the few wealthy people and the many poor people who lived within the boundaries of the Empire, Professor Beard gives an insight into the attitudes and assumptions that the people our Gospel reading describes this morning might have held, those who Luke says gathered, 'for a meal in the house of a leading Pharisee'. She writes,

What all would have agreed, both rich and poor, was that to be rich was a desirable state, that poverty was to be avoided if you possibly could ... Apart from a few philosophical extremists, no one in the Roman world seriously believed that poverty was honourable – until the growth of Christianity. The idea that the rich man might have a problem entering the kingdom of heaven would have seemed as preposterous to those living in the worst conditions as to the plutocrat in his mansion.

In the house of that leading Pharisee where Jesus had been invited to eat, the culture that Mary Beard described was evident: there was an issue about honour, and there was an issue about poverty and privilege. In that Pharisee's house, poverty was clearly considered to be a dishonourable state – as Luke implies later on in the reading, no one seriously considered that it would be appropriate to invite to a meal, the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind.

When someone was invited to a meal, the evidence of that Pharisee's house shows that it was an invitation that carried with it an indication of your social place in the world. Luke writes, 'When Jesus noticed how the guests were trying to secure *the places of honour*, he spoke to them in a parable,'¹

If Mary Beard is accurate in her description of Roman and Romanised societies of her day, the parable that Jesus told must have sounded ridiculous to those sitting with him in that house. He said, 'When you are asked by someone to a wedding-feast, do not sit down in the place of honour. It may be that some person more distinguished than yourself has been invited ... When you are having a party ... do not invite your friends, your brothers and other relations, or your rich neighbours ... ask the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.'

This suggestion that the people who Jesus was eating with, friends of a leading Pharisee, society's elite, were not in fact as special as they thought they were – 'it may be that some person more distinguished than yourself has been invited', and that in fact they were no more special than the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind would have been to those listening not just a ridiculous thing to suggest, but offensive. Those listening to him might even have felt indignant at his words.

In this story, Jesus is turning the social world on its head. Not for the first time, of course. Over the past two Sundays we have heard how he did this in other contexts. In the synagogue he overturned religious convention by healing on the Sabbath, and people were indignant. He

¹ Luke 14: 7

proclaimed too that he was going to bring a sword to social convention and divide father against son, mother against daughter - he intended to empower younger generations.

Jesus' ministry, which today we might understand as a rather benign proclamation of kindness and peacefulness, had, in his day, the potential to be extremely disruptive. Jesus was a disruptor of society, of religion and of politics; overturning not just the tables of moneychangers, but social expectations and cultural conventions.

In this period it is evident from what Mary Beard writes that there was no social embarrassment in making it clear that privilege should be honoured and poverty dishonoured. Today, we would find it hard to be so explicitly snobbish. But, although we might not say it out loud, there is a lot of implicit assumptions made about people based on their education, work and wealth.

It doesn't take long, travelling first class, to begin to think that you might be superior to those travelling in economy. Your pay doesn't need to be much above the average for very long before you start to think you not only earn more, but are worth more than those who earn below the average. The more Highers you pass, the more likely are you to think that not only have you an aptitude for learning, but that your intelligence makes your opinion more valuable than the opinion of others. It is too easy, for example, to find people with degrees from university who believe that others should have to pass an IQ test before they can vote.

What we see when we see Jesus Christ in the house of a leading Pharisee or in a synagogue, or in the Temple is that this kind of social world, whether in the first century or the twenty-first, is not the kind of social world God wants us to have. What we see when we see Jesus Christ is that where this kind of social world exists, what God wants us to do is to find ways to disrupt it; to turn it on its head, so that people aren't honoured on the basis of their wealth or privilege – or dishonoured for their lack of these things.

What we see also when we see Jesus Christ disrupting a meal in the house of a leading Pharisee, or disrupting religious practice in a synagogue, or the Temple is a demonstration of what he means when he said that God loves us.

Love can be many things: it can be romantic; it can be physical; it can be sacrificial, but what it always is, is transformational. Love changes things; it is always disruptive. God loves us so much he wants to disrupt us and our society; to change us and to transform us.

This morning we are in our house to share a meal, and like those who gathered in the house of a leading Pharisee back then, Jesus is also present here with us today. The meal we will share this morning is meant to represent the nature of Jesus' love for us, and the love that we are called to express towards others, our neighbours. This meal should change us, transform us, disrupt our assumptions about the world around us.

In many ways it does that. There aren't any special seats, or special people, and although we have set aside some to be elders - to serve and administer this sacrament – which is a responsibility that we recognise and value, there is no assumption that it is the kind of responsibility that carries with it any sense of entitlement or privilege. Communion should be a sign of how we want to disrupt our society, transform it, change it.

But, in thinking of communion as something that is disruptive to the world around us, we might want to reflect on how we ourselves might disrupt our traditional communion practice; does it need transformed, changed? There are ways recently by which we have expressed our love for others by disrupting our own traditions in communion, changing them, transforming

them, just as Jesus disrupted the religious traditions and social practices of his day. For example, we have changed the nature of the very elements that we serve: non-alcoholic wine and gluten-free bread; everyone has a place at this table.

But, not everyone. If Jesus was sitting with us this morning how might he disrupt our traditions further? He might tell us a parable that encouraged us to reflect on who is not present here this morning – our children and young people. After all, he often took children from the edge of society and brought them in to the centre of his company, and disrupted expectations by doing so. It is something we might want to think more about.

The reading from the book of Hebrews this morning began with the words, 'Never cease to love your fellow-Christians.' What do we expect to happen when we love each other? We should expect to be changed, to be transformed, for our lives to be disrupted.

In a sermon that the hymn writer John Bell preached, he told a story about a man he knew who was slovenly; always untidy; often in debt; he rarely washed; he slurred his speech badly to the point of incomprehensibility.

The man moved one day from Glasgow and went to live in England. Two years later he reappeared one Friday night. He looked different and sounded different. It was late, and he wanted to stay, and he asked if he could have a bath; something he had never asked for before. As the bath ran, he proceeded to pour in bath salts, "for pleasure," he said. "It's the in-thing."

Over the course of the next day John Bell noticed a whole lot of changes in his friend - not just to his speech, his odour and his appearance, but also to his attitude to life, his ability to save money, and his confidence in a crowd. What had happened?

I'm sure some of you know the answer already. He had met a woman who loved him, and whom he loved. And he was changed, transformed; she had disrupted his life, turned it on its head.

God loves us, and so he wants to shake us up, and he wants us to love the world around us, and to shake it up.