

# A Place At The Table

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 28 August 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 15C

Jeremiah 2: 4-13; Luke 14:1, 7-14; Song: *Flags* by Brook Fraser

Contemporary reading: *The Guesthouse* by Rumi

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Reflections" tab

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I spent last week in Auckland, New Zealand, with my son Andrew who has autism. Since Andrew returned to New Zealand in early 2014 after it became clear that he was not eligible to access disability services in Australia, despite the reciprocal disability treaty between Australia and New Zealand, he has been living with his father, my former husband. And the reason he was not able to access that treaty is that in 2001 the treaty was changed and amended because people in government in Australia were concerned that too many Pacific Islanders and too many refugees were coming through New Zealand to Australia. So I think that my very white son has got caught up in the new framework of the White Australia Policy as it continues today.

But now the time has come when he is ready to move into supported independent living and a suitable house has been found with two other delightful young people who also have disabilities. The down side is that housing in Auckland is expensive, that it's a 30-minute drive from his father's house when the traffic is not bad. And Auckland is a lot like Sydney. Outrageously expensive housing, which is unaffordable for people on a pension or low income, and terrible traffic so the drive can take more than an hour. For Andrew on public transport, it's an hour and a half. And Andrew has been pretty sad about moving from the protection and care and company of his dad.

It was a full on week, even more physically and emotionally exhausting than I'd really expected. I left feeling there was still more I needed to do. But I also returned feeling relieved that Andrew was no longer homesick, distressed and sad, but becoming settled and relaxed, in part because of the time we'd spent together when I visited him in his new home.

It was hard to leave. When I got the airport in the afternoon, it was crazy busy. I was flying Emirates because it often has reasonable fares on the Sydney leg of its New Zealand to Dubai flights. And of course, I was flying economy class. But I remembered, as I stood in the long line, with some longing and nostalgia the last Emirates flight I'd taken back to Australia. Andrew and I were travelling back here after Christmas, when we were called to the podium at the gate and given new boarding passes upgrading us to Business Class.

It was amazing. Andrew delighted in the lie flat seat that moved in about ten different directions and I delighted in the comfort and space, not to mention delicious food and French wine. I know what it's like to be ready to take a lowly seat and to be suddenly, and apparently undeservedly, be offered a place of honour, to be in the terms of Luke's parable's "*moved up higher.*"

Like the important guest at the banquet Jesus described, who also got an upgrade, Andrew and I were the subject of great care and attention. I have no idea why we were chosen. But I can tell you that having experienced Business Class, it sure makes you hanker after what you're not getting the next time you fly economy! But I guess it's all relative. Even in economy Emirates is still a whole lot nicer than JetStar!

We live in country where many people aspire to get ahead, not to be part of the economy class crowd. Sydney people aspire to live in neighbourhoods with a harbour view. People seek success in the careers, not just to do their work well for its own sake, but to receive recognition and rewards that put them ahead of others. Facebook is full of people representing the lives they want others to see rather than the humble messiness that is usually the reality.

However, there is within some people an awareness that success and the trappings of success, like Business Class travel, are not actually what make for happiness and a fulfilled life. There are people who seek to make the most of where they are, who make their lives worthwhile through acts of love and kindness and engagement in the world so that the divisions and differences that plague us can be overcome.

In my aeroplane analogy (which I'm probably stretching to breaking point here), there are people who realise that if the riches of First Class and Business Class were shared, this would enable everyone to travel Premium Economy. A Premium Economy world would give everyone, including those who Jesus called the poor, the physically infirm, and the blind, enough food, shelter, education and health care to live well. In this story, Jesus challenges his hearers, and he challenges us today, to live differently.

In the parable today from Luke, Jesus pushed past the surface level issues of etiquette to a radical re-visioning of a world where domination and exclusion are replaced by table-turning hospitality and wild inclusion.

In this story, Jesus is doing more than giving a biblical Miss Manners lesson. He is highlighting the ways in which the realm of God establishes its own social and spiritual order. He tells his hearers that trying to presume a higher place in the order is perhaps unwise and unfaithful.

To understand this passage, it is helpful to have some knowledge of Palestinian wedding feasts. The male guests recline on couches, with the centre couch being the place of honour, its occupants chosen according to wealth, power, or office. If a more prominent guest arrives late, as might often be the case, someone of lesser rank is asked to move to a less prestigious location. Jesus is offering sound practical advice to choose the lowest place so that you can be invited up – you can get an upgrade - but he is also pointing to something deeper and richer.

The realm of God is about how God offers us an invitation to receive a genuine blessing. In this scene we learn that it is crassly unfaithful to store up spiritual air-points to record and make ostentatious displays of our deservedness.

Receiving a blessing that invites us to grow into a deeper relationship with God is not something we can work our way into through acts designed to display our worth. Instead Sacred Energy/Spirit invites us to live into our createdness through our everyday acts toward each other, and in and through relationship with God and with creation. To live with generosity, compassion and inclusion.

Jesus wants us to understand that our all-too-human drive to seek the best seat in the house, at the party, on the plane, will not mark genuine participation in God's mercy or love.

But the story doesn't end with advice about Middle Eastern table hierarchy and instructions for avoiding the embarrassment or shame of being downgraded. No, Jesus is not done at that point. He also has words of wisdom, warning, and blessing for his Pharisee host who may be pursuing an elite agenda by thinking that inviting those who can return his invitation is a sign of faithful witness. Jesus suggests he's been welcoming only those who can return the favour of hospitality. He challenges him to think again.

Jesus is clear who should be invited: people who are the very fabric of God's realm—the poor, the physically disabled, and the blind. For Jesus, extending genuine hospitality to *“the least of these”* through acts of unselfish hospitality and kindness can wash a blessing over us and give us a sense of the great blessing that is to come in the promise of the realm of God.

This story is typical of St. Luke's Gospel. Luke's Jesus is a foodie. He often pictures Jesus eating and drinking — from calling Matthew, the hated tax collector, to be his disciple over a meal, to his Last Supper Passover meal with his disciples. The Jesus of Luke likes to eat and drink. Luke's Jesus also always has a very open table.

As we hear these stories, we are invited to contextualise them. To think about hospitality and inclusion. In our time, in our culture, who is not on the guest list because they don't help our own social standing or even our comfort level?

Welcome at Jesus' table is for everyone, rich and poor, housed and homeless, women, men and intersex persons, people of all ages, races, ethnicities, religions, and sexual orientations. People with intellectual, mental and physical disabilities. Yesterday, thousands of Australians turned out at rallies around the country to insist that refugees and asylum seekers fleeing from persecution be offered a place at our abundant table.

This story is meant to turn us toward the hurting, the struggling, and the vulnerable in every dimension of our lives, not excluding them at festive times, so that they are never out of sight, out of mind.

This teaching is also ethical. It is intended to form communal values that celebrate self-giving rather than the practice of calculating what we are likely to get in return for our good deed.

This saying of Jesus says more about ministry and less about manners. He turns himself toward the marginalised and the excluded. He shares the table with those from whom people with conventional values turn away.

From one society to another, from one era to another, there are different lists of those from whom respectable people expect to turn aside. Jesus' challenge reaches out across boundaries of place and time, calling us to be more aware of those from whom we are inclined to avert our eyes, and to follow his Way rather than those who baptize common prejudices as virtues.

We who “*have been baptized into Christ Jesus*” are called to conform to the vision of the realm of God. To live into our baptism, is to be ever mindful of those who are typically left out.

As part of the period of listening to the word, before this reflection, Rachel sang Brooke Fraser’s beautiful song “Flags.” Brooke Fraser names the reality that in so much of the world, the last are not first, and the first are not last. The world we experience is, so often, not just and inclusive.

But Fraser moves from lament to promise, to celebration and hope... When we see signs of exclusion around us: of indigenous people denied the birthright of dignity in their own land; of LGBTI people forced to endure a vitriolic public opinion poll about the worth of our relationships; asylum seekers treated with cruelty and inhumanity on Manus and Nauru; it can be easy to despair.

But Brooke Fraser’s song, so beautifully sung by Rachel, reminds us that at the core of our faith we hold on to hope, and that we live into that hope by practising where we are, the values of the realm of God. The song says:

*Of this I am sure*

*You who weep now will laugh again*

*All you lonely, be lonely no more*

*Yes, the last will be first*

*Of this I'm sure*

*I don't know why the innocents fall*

*While the monsters stand*

*I don't know why the little ones thirst*

*But I know the last shall be first*

*I know that the last shall be first*

This is our faith.

May it be so

because of the way we choose to live and love and be

is joined to divine grace and blessing

so that indeed there will be,

for everyone born, a place at the table.