

28 August 2016

Mainly thanks to good timing on the part of my parents, I was in the seventh form – or year thirteen as it is now called – and a prefect in the very same year my school celebrated its centennial. I went to New Plymouth Boy's High School, a school that was - and indeed still is - very proud of its tradition and its heritage. Especially when it comes to rugby.

So, needless to say, the centennial was a very big deal.

Celebrations throughout the year included the building of a new gymnasium, and having none other than the then Prime Minister Rob Muldoon attend the end of year prize giving. I even got presented a prize by the man himself. But the main event was a reunion of old boys and friends of the school held over Easter weekend, and one of the highlights of the weekend was a formal dinner at the New Plymouth racecourse complex. Some senior students, myself included, got to help out as ushers, on the understanding we would get quietly fed somewhere down the back, which sounded like a pretty good deal to us. But we were under very strict instructions, which included the non-consumption of any intoxicating beverages.

The hundreds of guests arrived, and were shown to their tables, and we waited at the back, awaiting our cue to take a seat somewhere out of the way. But just before the formalities were about to commence, our Headmaster Tom Ryder got up from his seat at the top table, and came striding towards us. Tom always had a certain look when he was up to something, and this was such an occasion.

He came right up to me and asked if I was hungry. What kind of question was that to ask a 17 year old male? Upon telling him I was, he told me and a friend to follow him. And the next thing we knew was that two extra seats were being placed at the top table. For us. Tom had suddenly decided that it was not right that there were no current students represented at the table, and that this needed to be put right immediately.

We suddenly found ourselves being the centre of attention. Speakers made reference to us in their speeches. I had to make conversation with the various dignitaries I was seated with. And, then, at some point during the dinner, Tom asked if I wanted a beer. I stammered something about how the Deputy Headmaster had told us that was absolutely forbidden. But Tom was the Headmaster, and he vetoed that particular restriction for the night. It was all very surreal. There were some highly esteemed individuals present amongst the guests that night, but we and not they got to sit with the headmaster, the Chairperson of the Board of Governors, and whoever else was at the top table, and we were both honoured and humbled by the whole experience.

I thought of that centennial dinner while I was contemplating today's gospel reading. Especially when Jesus spoke of being honoured by being unexpectedly invited to sit at a higher place at a banquet.¹ In our busy world, where it is all too easy to hurriedly grab a sterile selection of questionable sustenance from a drive-through junk food outlet, it can be easy to forget the important role meals play in many cultures, including how seriously they were taken in Jesus' day, or how seriously they are still taken today in many societies.

In Jesus day, there were also some very rigid protocols surrounding meals, of the kind we would typically only see in relatively formal situations today. Such as my school's centennial dinner. Although, in Jesus day, much of these revolved around power structures. People were supposed to know their place in society. But Jesus did not grovel to those in power, and he treated tax collectors, prostitutes, and outcasts as being equals. And offering radical hospitality was a natural expression of Jesus' challenge to the established social order.

There are many stories throughout the gospels of Jesus dining and socialising with people who would not normally be welcome in polite company. Especially in the Gospel According to St Luke, where dining is a dominant theme. Indeed, it has been said that, "In Luke's Gospel Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal."²

The early Church followed his example. Members of the early Church used to host communal feasts known as agape, or love, meals, which are to believed to have catered for the poor and the stranger as well as the gathered Christian community. While Roman banquets reinforced the strict hierarchy of social boundaries, agape meals broke down human distinctions, and in doing so reflected the new social reality of living in God's kingdom. They continued Jesus' practice of offering radical hospitality to those most in need.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus specifically instructs us to, "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" when we host a banquet.³ And if we are to truly follow Jesus, we are obliged to also follow his example of radical hospitality. Now hospitality is a word

that can be misunderstood. These days, it is usually taken to mean entertaining friends and family. But its original meaning was caring for the vulnerable, and it is something the Church has always done, with varying degrees of success.

I know many of you are doing so through such ministries as caring for the poor and the homeless, or visiting the sick and the imprisoned. Whenever we feed someone who is hungry, refresh someone who is thirsty, welcome a stranger, clothe someone who lacks clothing, care for someone who is sick, or visit someone who is in prison, we do this for the Christ.⁴ And as it said in today's Epistle Reading from the Letter to the Hebrews, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it".⁵

While there has been something of a revival of the agape meal in some denominations of the Church in recent times, it now tends to be a separate event to the morning Eucharist. Whereby the original version seems to have been closely related to the Mass. In other words, it appears that early celebrations of the Eucharist involved an actual meal. Of course, we celebrate the Eucharist with bread and wine, so our worship revolves still around a meal.

My question for us all today is: whom do we welcome at our church today? The poor and the homeless? Widows and orphans? Clients of the mental health system? Addicts? Those who have been recently released from prison? Migrants and refugees? Or how about those whose lifestyles some would call sinful?

Even if we genuinely believe others to be wrong, it is not our place to judge them, or tell them they should not be in church. Because we are all broken in our own way and we have no right to consider ourselves superior to anybody else. I don't know who originally said it, but a quote I keep coming across is, "The Church isn't a museum for good people, it's a hospital for the broken".⁶

We have no right to look down on others. Or to make judgment calls over whether those in need are truly worthy of our assistance or not. Jesus welcomed those who were rejected by the rest of our society, and he set us an example to emulate. Jesus welcomed all. He didn't drug test the thousands he fed with a few loaves and fishes, and he didn't check the insurance details of those he healed. He gave whatever he could to all who sought him. He even willingly gave up his own life. Now that truly is radical hospitality.

How radical can we be?

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<http://theword.tk>

¹ Luke 14:10-11

² Robert Karris, cited in: <http://www.theologynetwork.org/theology-of-everything/starting-out/making-a-meal-of-it.htm>

³ Luke 14:13

⁴ Matthew 25:34-20

⁵ Hebrews 13:2

⁶ Anonymous