

Trinity 8 Havant (2019 0811) (Parish Eucharist)

Welcome to the feast!

Eating and drinking are fundamental to human life. We need food to keep us alive of course, but eating with other people turns a physical necessity into something that builds relationships. Offering refreshment to guests is a sign of hospitality.

It is then not surprising that food (and especially shared meals) play such an important part in many religions. The Bible is no exception and culminates in the angel's cry in Revelation, *Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.*

Here in the Eucharist we have a foretaste of that supper. Jesus himself is our host at our altar here is St Faith's as he will be in heaven.

You may be wondering where all this is going, so here at last is the text for his morning's sermon, tucked away in middle of this morning's gospel: *Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them.*

Jesus is encouraging his disciples to be alert and watchful while they wait for his return, and like so often he stands convention on its head. Getting home in the middle of the night we might expect him to be waited on, but instead, says Jesus, late though it is and however travel weary he must be, it is the master who sits them down and waits on them. It rather reminds us of another meal, the last supper, at which Jesus performed a servant's task for his disciples in washing their feet. In both cases however his humility needs to be matched by preparation or response on their part. This is not a freebie! Remember how at the Last Supper Jesus Peter had to be washed by Jesus if he was to have a share in him: in this morning's gospel the servants have to be alert and watchful for their master's return. *"He (the Master that is) will have them (his servants) sit down to eat."*

This idea of Jesus bidding us sit to eat prompted a wonderful poem by the seventeenth century priest George Herbert. It's printed in your service paper, so you might like to turn to it now.

*Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lack'd any thing.*

*A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?*

*Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.*

The scene is a meal at a gracious country house where the host is welcoming a guest into his home. But the visitor feels unworthy and hesitates to go far beyond the threshold. The host however is described at the outset as "Love" and as the poem progresses we realise that this is a code-word for God, because, as St John tells us "God is love."

So, the poem is a conversation between Love and the soul. It alternates between the poet's sense of sin and unacceptability on the one hand, and, on the other, Love's persistence in offering repeated reassurance. God notices the anguish of the reluctant guest and takes a gentle initiative. The language and rhythms of the poem highlight the difference between the two speakers: Love is light and airy and joyful. The soul is gloomy, cast down and uncertain.

Remember how it started:

*Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.*

Or then, listen again to the last few lines of the second verse:

*I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?*

There is even a little pun there: *Who made the **eyes** but I?*

Even then Herbert's self-loathing won't give up:

*Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.*

This is a very carefully crafted poem. It wants to do three things.

- 1 It wants to tell us about God's boundless love.*
- 2 It is realistic about our unworthiness of this love*
- 3 And it wants to tell us that in spite of our unworthiness God still loves us.*

So here comes the master-stroke:

And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?

If we were in any doubt before, there can't be any now. Love is Jesus himself who has carried the whole burden of Herbert's guilt - and not only his but "*the sins of the whole world.*"

Ah, of course. In that case, says the anguished soul, "*I will serve.*" It's the first positive thing the soul has said. But, "*Oh, no you won't*" is the response. "*You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat.*"

Do you remember the first of the so-called "comfortable words" from the Communion Service in the Book of Common Prayer: *Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.*

Now the poet believes, and accepts the offer and the service of the divine host. *So I did sit and eat.*

Do you see how this wonderful poem echoes the shape of the Eucharist?

We are invited by Jesus. We need to be aware of our unworthiness to accept his invitation. But we also need to know that our host is himself our maker and redeemer, he has himself paid whatever price was necessary for us to be accepted.

And see how it is the same story right to the end. As we come to his table it is our host himself who feeds us. We say, *“Lord, I am not worthy to receive you”*, but he says *“Let me worry about that, come and eat.”*

As I said at the beginning, *“Welcome to the feast!”*