**Morning Praise @ Home 23rd March 2025**

**Opening prayer**

Blessed are you, God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you have blessed us with every spiritual blessing; enable us by your power to be true to our calling and live holy and blameless lives before you all our days, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. **Amen**

**Confession** Let us admit to God the sin which always confronts us.

**Lord God, we have sinned against you; we have done evil in your sight. We are sorry and**

**repent.** **Have mercy on us according to your love. Wash away our wrongdoing and cleanse us**

**from our sin.** **Renew a right spirit within us** **and restore us to the joy of your salvation,** **through**

**Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen** cf Psalm 51

**Absolution** May the Father of all mercies cleanse us from our sins, and restore us in his image

to the praise and glory of his name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

### Bible Reading Luke 14:1-14

### Reflection from Sue Coyne

### *The large-hearted love of God*

Have any of you been out for a nice meal with friends recently? Much of our social life is focused around eating together. Think of the appeal of the Saturday Kitchen, or how Hugh Fearnley Whittingstall’s programmes used so often to lead up to a feast of some sort.

Meals taken together signify hospitality, inclusion, celebration, relaxation, the recognition that guests are worth making the effort for – whether it’s a plate of sloppy pasta or a four-course dinner.

Meals occur again and again in Luke’s account of Jesus’ ministry. Just as food prepared with concern for others is a physical gift, so Luke pictures God’s gift of life as a banquet to which all are invited. The Gospel passage starts with Jesus on the way to an important Sabbath meal, and just a few verses later on, he will tell the parable of the Great Banquet.

This week John and I received an invitation to a friend’s 70th birthday celebration dinner. It won’t be a large gathering, so we feel very privileged to have been asked. It makes us feel like we’re ‘proper’ friends. We’ll want to make sure that we are appropriately dressed.

The guests at the meal hosted by a leader of the Pharisees would have appreciated the honour of their invitation and made doubly sure that they presented themselves ‘properly’. In the run up to the event they would have taken pains to be ritually clean and observably law-abiding, and were doubtless wearing their best bib and tucker. Then they could feel sure that they were right in the eyes of God (and other Pharisees) and be confident of their standing.

But what did Jesus do? On his way to this important event, he:

* Took hold of someone visibly ill and unclean, thereby contaminating his own ritual purity
* Then performed a miraculous healing on the Sabbath, ignoring the requirement of the law to do no work.

And his reaction to the tuttings and muttered condemnation of the other Pharisees? In effect he went ‘And?’, showing them how unimportant their vision of purity and legalism was, compared to the large-hearted love of God.

What is more important, he asked:

* Looking out for others who need God’s care, or just making sure we receive it?
* Rescuing someone from a mess they can’t escape from or making sure that propriety is observed?

What matters more to God:

* That all and sundry find a welcome in his church family, or that we are following the Order of Service in the correct fashion?

Jesus overturned the etiquette of the Pharisees, convictions that were deeply held and religiously taught – because it was so much more important that people receive the offer of salvation.

I wonder how Jesus would challenge the way we operate at St Nicholas’?

* For example, how well do we accommodate people who feel ill at ease singing, or find lots of written text a struggle?
* Are our services physically comfortable and spiritually warm?

I know I am the sort of person for whom it is always important that things are done properly. I see it as a way of honouring God - which is not wrong, unless it means that I have forgotten that the sole function of any congregation is to serve God’s purposes *for others*. That may mean having to adjust my expectations…

Something Jesus noticed was that, once he had reached his destination, the invited guests were scrambling for the places of greatest honour. What motivates people to do that?

It is because they believe that they are more special and important than others in the company, superior compared to the flaky – ‘Don’t they know who I am?!’

But Luke describes Jesus’ comments, about being humble and opting for the least distinguished place, not just as good advice to avoid social humiliation if more important latecomers arrive, but as a parable. That means that there is a deeper meaning.

Luke’s Gospel was being written at a time when many Jews were having to confront the claims of Christians: the assertion that there was a further revelation of God’s love, in the person and work of the ‘peasant’ Jesus, and that this overtook their claim to be first in the queue for righteousness.

And for those Jews who had accepted salvation through Christ, there was the uncomfortable realisation that non-Jewish believers had just the same privileges as they did. It was as if these newcomers were showing up in tracky bottoms half way through a formal dinner, yet were just as likely to be given the best cut of meat!

For Jews with a religious heritage of hundreds of years, this was an uncomfortable shock.

But again and again the Gospel of Luke stresses that the kingdom of God is about God’s grace:

* It is about understanding that none of us have any ‘right’ to sit at his table, other than that he has invited us
* It involves recognising that, whether we are educated or uneducated, whether wealthy or on benefits, whether an experienced Church-goer or stumbling towards an understanding that God even exists, there is nothing
  + that we can do / achieve / or be that will make God love us any more than he already does
  + and nothing that we can do / achieve / or be that will make him love us any less.

It is liberating when we start to realise that our worth depends on God’s view of us, not on our own estimation, or the world’s, or the church’s. There is no need to scramble for a place of honour because simply being at the feast is enough. The large-hearted love of God has embraced us.

And we should never allow the muttered criticisms of the outraged to curtail this freedom we have in Christ. People were looking out to trip Jesus up at every turn, but he did not let that deflect him from his loving purposes.

But the passage goes further. Because Jesus knows very well how we tend to migrate into ‘clubs’ of similarly minded people, who behave like us, talk like us, spend their time in a way we appreciate, he issues a further challenge:

* To his original hearers he says, ‘Don’t rely on the purity of your religious clique but embrace the ‘unrighteous’.

He is also exhorting us:

* Not only to offer care to those who can do us a favour in return, but also to those who will not
* Not just to stay in our comfort zone with people like ourselves, but to get our hands dirty
* Not to be exclusive but inclusive.

Targeting our world, where the common refrain is ‘What’s in it for me?’, Jesus encourages his followers to embrace those around us with the same large-hearted love that God has, seeking nothing in return.

In terms of basic hospitality, think: who we can share our home and food with? Jesus prioritised the marginalised and I am pretty sure that, along our road, or in our place of work, will be:

* Those for whom relationships have recently disintegrated
* The long term ill and their carers
* Individuals living far from friends and family
* Isolated mums dealing with the kids alone
* Troubled teens who need an escape valve
* Single dads who rely on ready meals
* Neighbours we only smile at on bin day.

These are people God longs to invite to his table and he is asking us to demonstrate that fact by gently inviting them to our table first. It can just be a coffee, or soup and a roll. If the weather lets up, it can be a BBQ or, when colder evenings come, a casserole and baked potatoes. It could be a craft time or watching a film together. The simple act of sharing food and time in our homes makes us a living metaphor of God’s love.

And on the bigger scale of St Nicholas’, how can we be more welcoming of people ‘not like us’?

* Where do we need to be generous in our attitudes, rather than demand that newcomers comply with established standards?
* What might God want us to change, so that his banquet of salvation looks more appetising to onlookers?
* What skills, time and finance can we contribute to this?

In the coming week let’s think and pray about the answers to some of these questions.

Jesus asks his hearers not to expect recognition until we reach heaven, but to share in the large-hearted love of God, the Host who throws wide his arms to everybody.

**AMEN.**

### Affirmation of faith

Do you believe and trust in God the Father, source of all being and life, the one for whom we exist?

**We believe and trust in him.**

Do you believe and trust in God the Son, who took our human nature, died for us and rose again?

**We believe and trust in him.**

Do you believe and trust in God the Holy Spirit, who gives life to the people of God and makes Christ known in the world?

**We believe and trust in him. This is the faith of the Church.**

**This is our faith. We believe and trust in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

**Prayers of intercession led by John M-B**

Mighty God, you spoke to your servant Abram telling him not to be afraid; to use you as his shield; and to expect a great reward.

Help us in our times of fear and worry, and constantly remind us of the reward of everlasting life that we can expect through faith in your son Jesus Christ.

Lord, in your mercy: **hear our prayer**

Almighty God, help us as a church to avoid the temptations of the world and dilute the Gospel message and to recognise that a watered-down gospel has tragic results which are eternal. May we all join in imitating St Paul, and live according to the example set to us by the life of Our Lord Jesus.

Lord, in your mercy: **hear our prayer**

Creator God, we pray for the world, its peoples and leaders, especially Ukraine.

Be with all those people who live in places troubled by disaster, natural or man-made.

We thank you for all of the wonders of the world, which belongs to you, but was given into our care at the beginning of time.

Help us to be good stewards, always mindful of the tragic consequences of our lack of care.

Lord, in your mercy: **hear our prayer**

Father God, the psalmist tells us to “seek your face” in the people who we live amongst.

May they too, as they look upon us, see something of you and of your son Jesus Christ shining from us.

Make us always a beacon of faith as we live the gospel out in all our words and actions.

Lord, in your mercy: **hear our prayer**

Merciful God, we raise before you those who we know and love who are ill or in need at this time, and we pray for all who care for them at home or in hospital.

Lord, in your mercy: **hear our prayer**

Gracious God, we remember those who have died, especially those who have died recently, and for all who mourn their passing.

Merciful Father, **accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen**

**The Lord’s Prayer** As our Saviour taught us, so we pray

***Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name, Thy kingdom come,******Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen***

**Closing prayer**

God give you grace to become the people He has called you to be, that you may live and work to his praise and glory, and the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us and remain with us always. **Amen**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. **In the name of Christ. Amen**