

Advent Reflections

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This Advent we are building on our Benefice's involvement with Inspiring Ipswich by choosing a theme that we can all be part of - hospitality. Offering hospitality is a way of deepening our fellowship with each other, friends and with strangers.

We shall look at examples of hospitality from the early Old Testament through to the End of Time as revealed in the book of Revelation. We hope that you will be encouraged to consider hospitality as a means of reaching out to people.

Next year we would like to follow on this line and arrange a Passover meal in each parish, during which we will hear again the story of the Passover (which will also be covered in depth in our Lent reflections) with both traditional Jewish and Christian aspects highlighted, and share a meal together.

Encourage others

We have a number of people from outside the Benefice who receive this email. However, we still have some people in our benefice who do not receive these mailings because we do not have their email address. I'd encourage you to forward these email reflections on to anyone you feel may benefit from them (with their permission).

Read a little more

I've attempted to keep readings to a reasonable length. However, such is the beauty of context and strands that single chunks do not always stand alone. I have recommended some further reading so that you may widen the perspective and your understanding.

Questions and queries

I am happy to reply to any questions, queries or comments you may wish to put to me. I don't know all the answers, but I'll respond as best I can.

With Blessings,

Paul

Advent: December 1

Genesis 18:1-8

One hot summer afternoon Abraham was sitting by the entrance to his tent near the sacred trees of Mamre, when the LORD appeared to him. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. He quickly ran to meet them, bowed with his face to the ground, and said, "Please come to my home where I can serve you. I'll have some water brought, so you can wash your feet, then you can rest under the tree. Let me get you some food to give you strength before you leave. I would be honoured to serve you." "Thank you very much," they answered. "We accept your offer." Abraham quickly went to his tent and said to Sarah, "Hurry! Get a large sack of flour and make some bread." After saying this, he rushed off to his herd of cattle and picked out one of the best calves, which his servant quickly prepared. He then served his guests some yogurt and milk together with the meat.

Abraham knows the importance of hospitality. When strangers appear, you serve them. In sparsely populated places and in urban concentrations the same unwritten law applies. When a stranger comes by you invite him in. For the traveller every place you stop by is a place of welcome. For the tent-dweller or the householder the prospect of a stranger or a traveller coming by is an opportunity to honour your traditions and serve them.

These particular strangers were not the usual travellers. It's clear from reading the account that they are special. Two are angels and one is God himself. Abraham certainly recognises them as being different. He provides them with his finest food. The best flour, the most succulent calf.

It takes time to prepare the food, of course. The guests would have been given something to drink, and the host would spend time with them, ensuring that they were comfortable and entertained while food was being prepared.

Because Abraham offered hospitality to God and his angels God blessed him firstly by promising him a son within a year. Sarah thought this was hilarious. A laugh broke out from within the cover of the tent where she was preparing the bread. Perhaps Sarah should have been aware of who it was who was talking. Perhaps she was just getting on with her work and had not even seen the visitors. We can only speculate. It seems she may have come to realise God had spoken because she tried to backtrack and cover up what she'd done by lying. Her disbelief had caught her out.

The guests are given the finest food and drink that Abraham has to offer. He has served God with the very best he has. He even walks with them as they go on their journey. It's during this walk together that God makes the decision to reveal to Abraham what He is about to do. If you don't know what it is, then read on in Genesis 18 and find out. Abraham is given a special privilege, not only to know what God is about to do, but also to plead with Him with a reasonable request that God does not do what he is about to do. If you read on, you will also discover how Abraham's nephew, Lot, also presses hospitality onto these travellers.

What would Abraham have prepared for any other traveller who was passing by?

What would Abraham and the visitors have talked about while they were waiting for the food to be prepared?

Have you ever lied when you've been confronted by the truth?

Have you ever been tripped up when your disbelief has been confounded?

Do you differentiate what you give others according to your perception of their worthiness to receive from you?

Father God, as we embark upon these reflections, I pray that I may take up and continue the ancient practice of hospitality. Guide me in seeking people that I should approach, and bless our meeting together. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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Advent: December 2

1 Kings 17:8-16

The LORD told Elijah, "Go to the town of Zarephath in Sidon and live there. I've told a widow in that town to give you food." When Elijah came near the town gate of Zarephath, he saw a widow gathering sticks for a fire. "Would you please bring me a cup of water?" he asked. As she left to get it, he asked, "Would you also please bring me a piece of bread?" The widow answered, "In the name of the living LORD your God, I swear that I don't have any bread. All I have is a handful of flour and a little olive oil. I'm on my way home now with these few sticks to cook what I have for my son and me. After that, we will starve to death."

Elijah said, "Everything will be fine. Do what you said. Go home and fix something for you and your son. But first, please make a small piece of bread and bring it to me. The LORD God of Israel has promised that your jar of flour won't run out and your bottle of oil won't dry up before he sends rain for the crops." The widow went home and did exactly what Elijah had told her. She and Elijah and her family had enough food for a long time. The LORD kept the promise that his prophet Elijah had made, and she did not run out of flour or oil.

God sends the prophet Elijah to a certain person who He has prepared beforehand to receive him as a guest. It may not seem that the woman is forthcoming with Elijah, who has to ask specifically for water and then bread. She is a poor widow on the brink of starving to death. Elijah's request for bread is in line with what God had told Elijah to expect. Her situation was, however, not so. She is embarrassed that she cannot offer Elijah what he asks for. I think that is revealed in the way she responds to Elijah. She swears an oath before God that her situation is dire, and that she is unable to meet Elijah's reasonable request. It is a terrible situation to be in, unable to offer hospitality.

It doesn't seem that God has prepared this woman at all. It may seem that God has left her in the lurch. He had spoken to her, telling her to give Elijah food – but she had only enough for a last meal with her son. She had no food prepared, only flour and oil.

God told Elijah to go to Zarephath and live there. He had prepared for Elijah the hospitality of a woman who was unable to feed him. God might have simply prompted a wealthy person of the town to put Elijah up for the duration. But He didn't.

Elijah, though the circumstance of the encounter with the woman looked unpromising, trusts God. If God says that the woman has been told to give him food, then the woman will give him food, despite all indications to the contrary. Elijah did not despair after she'd explained her poverty to him. He did not complain to God or accuse God of playing tricks on him. Elijah was faithful and obedient to God when he told the woman that everything would be fine. And it was.

The woman needed faith to believe that what Elijah told her to do was the right thing. She had to bring something of that meagre meal to Elijah. Elijah had promised that all would be well. She could have thought, "This is my last meal with my son. I am not going to spoil this by handing some of it over to a stranger." But she did.

Note that the woman gave Elijah the first serving – it's all she could have done. But it was enough. Her faith and obedience to the prophet released God's blessing on her.

Does God still offer impossible promises today?

Has God ever made a promise He has failed to keep? Be honest with yourself and God when answering this question.

Father God, miracles spring from faithful trust in what you promise. Open my heart to sense and flow with the beat of your heart. Teach me how to trust, even in the face of what appears impossible, for nothing is impossible with you. Amen.

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Advent: December 3

1 Samuel 25:1-13

David moved his camp to Paran Desert. Nabal was a very rich man who lived in Maon. He owned three thousand sheep and a thousand goats, which he kept at Carmel. His wife Abigail was sensible and beautiful, but he was from the Caleb clan and was rough and mean. One day, Nabal was in Carmel, having his servants cut the wool from his sheep.

David was in the desert when he heard about it. So he sent ten men to Carmel with this message for Nabal: I hope that you and your family are healthy and that all is going well for you. I've heard that you are cutting the wool from your sheep. When your shepherds were with us in Carmel, we didn't harm them, and nothing was ever stolen from them. Ask your shepherds, and they'll tell you the same thing. My servants are your servants, and you are like a father to me. This is a day for celebrating, so please be kind and share some of your food with us.

David's men went to Nabal and gave him David's message, then they waited for Nabal's answer. This is what he said: Who does this David think he is? That son of Jesse is just one more slave on the run from his master, and there are too many of them these days. What makes you think I would take my bread, my water, and the meat that I've had cooked for my own servants and give it to you? Besides, I'm not sure that David sent you! The men returned to their camp and told David everything Nabal had said. "Everybody get your swords!" David ordered. They all strapped on their swords. Two hundred men stayed behind to guard the camp, but the other four hundred followed David.

David is in hiding from jealous King Saul, who wants to destroy him. David had surprised Saul while he was asleep in his tent and could have killed him. Although Saul acknowledged that David had spared him and that he would be Saul's successor as king, David continues to be cautious. He moves camp and hears that Nabal is in the area. David's men had always been careful to honour Nabal by allowing his sheep and goats to graze safely and to protect his servants, and hopes that he will offer David some of his food for a religious festival that David wanted to celebrate. David wasn't looking for party food.

David sends a polite and respectful request to Nabal, who actually owes David a great debt of gratitude. Nabal, a rough meanie, refuses the request. Nabal has considered his own needs to be higher than those of a stranger in the area. His refusal was the last decision he ever made. You need to read on in the passage to find out what happened to him.

David's reasonable expectation of hospitality being offered to him is so entrenched in him that he calls his men to arms at Nabal's refusal.

Nabal was not unaware of the rules of hospitality. His response to David is cold and vindictive. In the presence of David's loyal soldiers, he describes their leader as a runaway slave. It seems as if Nabal is trying to find excuses that would free him from the ancient law of hospitality. If he could see David as someone unworthy of hospitality, then perhaps he could get away from his duty of hospitality. He doesn't stop there, though. He goes on to disrespect the soldiers to their faces by suggesting they could be lying to him. This is a pathetic twist. If he thought the soldiers were lying he would have responded to that first. Perhaps Nabal is all too aware that he has offered a

pathetically poor excuse for refusing David's request, so he tries to move the goalposts. In so doing, he digs a bigger hole for himself. It was a denial of hospitality wrapped in a blanket of slander.

Read the rest of the chapter to see how women know how to ease tense situations caused by bigmouth idiots. Read, too, about Abigail the diplomat's reward. It's a good read.

Is hospitality dependent on what you get out of it?

Does God ignore the hospitable?

What do you do if your enemy is hungry?

Has a refusal on your part ever felt as if it continued to hang in the air around you?

Father God, it is all too easy to be judgemental over people, or to let past grievances get in the way of building relationships. I know that neither is an excuse before you, and I confess my pride, and allow You to root it out. Amen.

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Advent: December 4

Isaiah 58:6-11

I'll tell you what it really means to worship the LORD. Remove the chains of prisoners who are chained unjustly. Free those who are abused! Share your food with everyone who is hungry; share your home with the poor and homeless. Give clothes to those in need; don't turn away your relatives. Then your light will shine like the dawning sun, and you will quickly be healed. Your honesty will protect you as you advance, and the glory of the LORD will defend you from behind. When you beg the LORD for help, he will answer, "Here I am!"

Don't mistreat others or falsely accuse them or say something cruel. Give your food to the hungry and care for the homeless. Then your light will shine in the dark; your darkest hour will be like the noonday sun.

The LORD will always guide you and provide good things to eat when you are in the desert. He will make you healthy. You will be like a garden that has plenty of water or like a stream that never runs dry.

The Book of Isaiah is full of hope for the future. The unruly and disobedient nation of Israel has fallen away from the Lord God many, many times. A significant verse in this book is:

Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. (Isaiah 1:18 ESV)

It encapsulates God's promise to lift up this rebellious and fallen people. The opening verses of chapter 58 are a wonderful prelude if you care to read that. Today's text is God's description of true worship of Him. It's about the way we treat others, about justice and hospitality in both lodging and board. It's about righteous caring for the poor, the hungry, the naked, the dispossessed, family. We should also include the sick, the prisoners and our enemies.

This is what God loves, and delights to see in us, that we should care for people as He cares; to realise that it is God who clothes the naked by sending us with clothes, and so on.

The first extract above tells us that true worship of God is more than coming into His presence. Actually, true worship *is* coming into the Lord's presence, but we cannot come there if we choose to shirk the responsibilities of our redemption, our call to share the gospel with all in our circles of acquaintance, our call to action for justice and righteousness in our world. We'll end up with thin worship if we neglect these things.

How much do I care for the persistent poor?

How much do I care for the homeless?

How would I bring one of these into the presence of God?

Father God, forgive me when I have not bothered to take up the reigns of Your call on my life - when I have enjoyed You but not the world you have made; when I have enjoyed Jesus but not cared for the poor; for when I have enjoyed your Spirit's presence but have exercised none of his gifts. Stir me, stir my church into living the whole Gospel. Amen.

Advent: December 5

2 Kings 4:8-17

Once, while Elisha was in the town of Shunem, he met a rich woman who invited him to her home for dinner. After that, whenever he was in Shunem, he would have a meal there with her and her husband. Some time later the woman said to her husband, "I'm sure the man who comes here so often is a prophet of God. Why don't we build him a small room on the flat roof of our house? We can put a bed, a table and chair, and an oil lamp in it. Then whenever he comes, he can stay with us."

The next time Elisha was in Shunem, he stopped at their house and went up to his room to rest. He said to his servant Gehazi, "This woman has been very helpful. Have her come up here to the roof for a moment." She came, and Elisha told Gehazi to say to her, "You've gone to a lot of trouble for us, and we want to help you. Is there something we can request the king or army commander to do?" The woman answered, "With my relatives nearby, I have everything I need." "Then what can we do for her?" Elisha asked Gehazi. Gehazi replied, "I do know that her husband is old, and that she doesn't have a son." "Ask her to come here again," Elisha told his servant. He called for her, and she came and stood in the doorway of Elisha's room.

Elisha said to her, "Next year at this time, you'll be holding your own baby son in your arms." "You're a man of God," the woman replied. "Please don't lie to me." But a few months later, the woman got pregnant. She gave birth to a son, just as Elisha had promised.

We do not have a name for this woman – she is only known as the Shunamite. Here is a lady who loves to offer hospitality. She can obviously afford it, but she is also willing to spend time with Elisha over food. She had not offered Elisha hospitality because he was a prophet – it's not until later that she comes to think he may be one. She even extends her house for Elisha.

This woman is rich, but she is childless and her husband is old. Her reward for giving Elisha board and lodging is more than she could have hoped for. We can understand her disbelief, just as we can understand Sarah's laugh of irony, for, as the Authorised Version so delicately describes: *it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women*, and I guess that the manner of men was beyond the husband of the Shunamite woman. The disbelief of both these women is cancelled out by the promise of God, directly, or here through the prophet Elisha, for Elisha himself would not have had the authority personally to make such a promise. With God, all things are possible.

If I know that God's promises are not quashed by my lack of faith, what then can I now I hope for?

How do you recognise a holy person of God?

What is not possible for God?

Father God, it is clear that blessings follow from hospitality. None come from expectation, but from Your gracious loving-kindness to us as You respond to our unconditional giving. Teach me to put You first in whatever I do for others. Amen.

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Advent: December 6

Psalm 23:1-6

(A psalm by David.)

You, LORD, are my shepherd. I will never be in need. You let me rest in fields of green grass. You lead me to streams of peaceful water, and you refresh my life. You are true to your name, and you lead me along the right paths.

I may walk through valleys as dark as death, but I won't be afraid. You are with me, and your shepherd's rod makes me feel safe.

You treat me to a feast, while my enemies watch. You honour me as your guest, and you fill my cup until it overflows. Your kindness and love will always be with me each day of my life, and I will live forever in your house, LORD.

We all know this psalm. I hope you know it by heart, and that you not only say it aloud but proclaim it over your life and over the lives of others. Not one word is false. Not one statement about God in this psalm is mere poetry. Not one promise the psalmist claims will fail.

David knew God's provision because David fell upon God's provision. David knew God's promises because he depended on God. David also knew God's holiness and righteousness because he trespassed upon it.

Imagine a table set up – a feast in this translation. Imagine the finest of food and drink. Imagine that this is God's provision for you, both figuratively and literally. Imagine your enemies, those who have gossiped about you, the ones who have unfriended you, the individuals who have blocked you from social groups or from advancement in work. Think about the rats, the backstabbers, the mockers, the accusers, those watching out for you to slip. There they all are, standing at a distance while you are seated at God's table. Let them see how God loves you and protects you. Let the wine spill out of your cup as His love overflows.

See, too, the overflowing love of Jesus as his blood trickles down his side on the cross.

Now imagine the eternal wedding banquet won for you by Jesus, as you and all those who are the Body of Christ sit down with him, the Groom, the Head.

Why does proclamation of Scripture add to its power?

Can we claim this Psalm, a personal outpouring of David's, totally for ourselves?

Is it indulgent (or even wasteful) to have nothing but the finest of food and drink?

Father God, in Jesus be a shepherd to me. Lead me on to follow you wherever you take me. Keep me close, and bring me home safe on your shoulders should I ever stray from the way. In His name. Amen.

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Advent: December 7

Joel 2:18-27

The LORD was deeply concerned about his land and had pity on his people. In answer to their prayers he said, "I will give you enough grain, wine, and olive oil to satisfy your needs. No longer will I let you be insulted by the nations. An army attacked from the north, but I will chase it into a scorching desert. There it will rot and stink from the Dead Sea to the Mediterranean."

The LORD works wonders and does great things. So tell the soil to celebrate and wild animals to stop being afraid. Grasslands are green again; fruit trees and fig trees are loaded with fruit. Grapevines are covered with grapes. People of Zion, celebrate in honour of the LORD your God! He is generous and has sent the autumn and spring rains in the proper seasons. Grain will cover your threshing places; jars will overflow with wine and olive oil.

I, the LORD your God, will make up for the losses caused by those swarms and swarms of locusts I sent to attack you. My people, you will eat until you are satisfied. Then you will praise me for the wonderful things I have done. Never again will you be put to shame. Israel, you will know that I stand at your side.

I am the LORD your God— there are no other gods. Never again will you be put to shame.

God speaks through the prophet Joel, telling his people that there will once again be sufficient for their needs. Israel had walked away from God, away from His blessing and from His protection. Time and time again, through their disobedience or their neglect of God, the people of Israel found themselves overrun by foreign nations. God allowed his people to be a laughing-stock amongst the nations.

This was not what God wanted for his people, but this is what they asked for.

God desires to provide abundantly for those who love Him. We might consider the lavishness of God to be a bit much for our eco-times. However, when God blesses the earth, it is fruitful. Valleys shall stand thick with corn and people shall rejoice. There shall be overflow of oil and wine. The nation that turns to Christ shall prosper.

Not only does God provide abundantly: he also backfills for the lean times. The effects of God-sent pests are cancelled out.

For us in Christ this promise is still valid. Our disobedience as wayward individuals, as faithless Church leads to separation from God and His blessings. God offers to those who truly repent a restoration of blessing.

Should I not be satisfied simply with the past being forgiven?

If God restores that which my rebellious past has lost or wasted, how can I be reminded of the sin I committed?

Father God, you give us forgiveness in Jesus that not only wipes out the traces of my sin, but also the damage it caused. Sin forgiven leaves only one trace, that of The Cross. Amen.

Advent: December 8

Matthew 22:1-10

Once again Jesus used stories to teach the people: The kingdom of heaven is like what happened when a king gave a wedding banquet for his son. The king sent some servants to tell the invited guests to come to the banquet, but the guests refused. He sent other servants to say to the guests, "The banquet is ready! My cattle and prize calves have all been prepared. Everything is ready. Come to the banquet!"

But the guests did not pay any attention. Some of them left for their farms, and some went to their places of business. Others grabbed the servants, then beat them up and killed them.

This made the king so furious that he sent an army to kill those murderers and burn down their city. Then he said to the servants, "It is time for the wedding banquet, and the invited guests don't deserve to come. Go out to the street corners and tell everyone you meet to come to the banquet."

They went out on the streets and brought in everyone they could find, good and bad alike. And the banquet room was filled with guests.

Many parables of Jesus start with "The kingdom of heaven is like ...". The kingdom can be a place, like the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, or something that pervades all places. It can also be a kingdom with a spiritual rather than a physical dimension. It is important that we do not have a single picture of the meaning otherwise some parables may become difficult to understand and may limit our perception of The Kingdom.

Jesus is talking about his Heavenly Father's invitation to share with Him in heaven. The invitation has gone out to the select guests, who Jesus may be suggesting are the Jews, the people of Israel. Their history of turning away from God and the way they ill-treated God's prophets are hinted at. It may be that those Jews in power who heard this parable directly from Jesus or via others (did they have spies around Jesus?) would recognise this thinly-veiled sting in the parable. Jesus did not set out to offend. People chose to be offended by the One whose light of truth revealed their works of darkness.

I'm one of the bad 'uns on the street corner, and I've been invited. I have a ticket that will not be taken away from me. I'm already an invited guest at the Wedding Banquet to end all wedding banquets!

Can I really be that sure that I have a ticket?

How do you know if you have a ticket?

Do you deserve a ticket?

Who will you be taking with you to that banquet?

Father God, your invitation has gone out to the world, and I am not only one of those on the street corner with a Golden Ticket, but now also one of the servants who will pass that invitation on to others. Send me out to the places and people you have already prepared for me. Amen.

Advent: December 9

Luke 5:27-32

Later, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the place for paying taxes. Jesus said to him, "Come with me." Levi left everything and went with Jesus.

In his home Levi gave a big dinner for Jesus. Many tax collectors and other guests were also there. The Pharisees and some of their teachers of the Law of Moses grumbled to Jesus' disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with those tax collectors and other sinners?" Jesus answered, "Healthy people don't need a doctor, but sick people do. I didn't come to invite good people to turn to God. I came to invite sinners."

Levi responded to Jesus' call. Jesus was not practising some magic power of persuasion over Levi - he responded of his own free will to Jesus' call. I don't think that this was the first time he'd encountered or heard about Jesus, or that Jesus picked him out of thin air. There will have been in Levi's heart some seed planted that was beginning to sprout and grow - he will have been prepared in some way, just like the Shunamite woman. As to Jesus, it may have been the prompting of the Holy Spirit within him to speak to Levi or to see in him a man who might well respond to Jesus' call.

The same applies to all of us. There's something planted in a person that may lie dormant for some time, and then grows at some point. God's Holy Spirit is a mover and a shaker, and a sovereign work of God in that person's spirit that might just help tip the balance, but not without a willing response from that person. Nobody comes into the Kingdom of Heaven against their will.

It seems that Levi may have left everything behind, with no plan to come back to his job - it would be odd to leave everything for a short while, as tax-collection waits for no-one. There's nothing to suggest that he was a dishonest tax collector. He would have taken his due cut from what was collected, though he would have been despised by just about everyone for taking on the role. Jesus did not despise him.

Levi practises hospitality in a big way. He invites Jesus to his home in the posh quarter as the guest of honour. "Oh, no, I couldn't possibly accept your invitation" is a response that did not enter Jesus' mind. He accepted, and with gratitude. It's amazing that Jesus happily accepts an offer to dine with tax collectors (who are still in their job) "and other sinners". Is this the sort of place Jesus should go? Of course it is - we have to be careful that we might have similar thoughts to those of the grumbling Pharisees and teachers.

Perhaps we'd jump at the opportunity of an invite to dine with people on a higher rung. Jesus stepped down to be with the people who came to the feast. Imagine the conversation around that table.

Have you been prompted by God's Holy Spirit within you to say something to or share something with another person? Did you respond to the prompt?

What's your salvation story?

Who have you shared it with?

Would you accept an offer to dinner from a collaborator?

Who needs an invite to dinner from you?

What sort of conversation would have gone on round that table?

Father God, You call us personally to be part of you perfect plan. Give me grace and humility to accept your call, to stop whatever gets in the way, and to move forward with you. Amen.

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Advent: December 10

Luke 14:7-14

Jesus saw how the guests had tried to take the best seats. So he told them: When you are invited to a wedding feast, don't sit in the best place. Someone more important may have been invited. Then the one who invited you will come and say, "Give your place to this other guest!" You will be embarrassed and will have to sit in the worst place.

When you are invited to be a guest, go and sit in the worst place. Then the one who invited you may come and say, "My friend, take a better seat!" You will then be honoured in front of all the other guests. If you put yourself above others, you will be put down. But if you humble yourself, you will be honoured.

Then Jesus said to the man who had invited him: When you give a dinner or a banquet, don't invite your friends and family and relatives and rich neighbours. If you do, they will invite you in return, and you will be paid back. When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. They cannot pay you back. But God will bless you and reward you when his people rise from death.

The best seats are the ones nearest the host and most influential people. Being, and moreover, being seen close to someone above you in society can massage your own sense of self-importance. I've been at dinners where groups of people grab seats for themselves without regard to others. I've even found myself sitting apart from Christine because no-one would move up or down a bit!

Jesus offers a practical solution for acquiring honour – sit in a poor seat and get invited up! Great, but only if you get invited up, of course! If you aren't invited up, then rejoice that you've found the right place to sit. It's not so much about honour as humility and the slow joys that it brings.

Jesus now turns the tables round on the host. Inviting people to dinner who do not have the means to invite you back (though we shouldn't use this as a weapon of humiliation) allows you to be open-handed in your hospitality. It's not just the modestly-paid Vicar or the church elders and officials you should be inviting to a meal. How about saving up for something more like a banquet for as many you can invite?! Hire the Village Hall, get some caterers - your guests will be talking about it for years. It's good stewardship to honour God.

Christians are found in numbers on soup kitchens and other hospitality for poor and homeless on the street or in a church hall. Who'd dare invite some of them to their own home for a meal? There may be risks, but a reward in heaven awaits.

How can you start being hospitable in your home, or along with a friend in their home?

How do you know who you should invite?

What are things stopping you from offering hospitality? Tell a friend.

Father God, You call us to be generous in hospitality. When I put up an inadequate or selfish excuse before You, would you shoot holes through it and let Your light and truth shine through. Amen.

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Advent: December 11

Luke 14:15-24

After Jesus had finished speaking, one of the guests said, "The greatest blessing of all is to be at the banquet in God's kingdom!"

Jesus told him: A man once gave a great banquet and invited a lot of guests. When the banquet was ready, he sent a servant to tell the guests, "Everything is ready! Please come." One guest after another started making excuses. The first one said, "I bought some land, and I've got to look it over. Please excuse me." Another guest said, "I bought five teams of oxen, and I need to try them out. Please excuse me." Still another guest said, "I have just got married, and I can't be there."

The servant told his master what happened, and the master became so angry that he said, "Go as fast as you can to every street and alley in town! Bring in everyone who is poor or crippled or blind or lame."

When the servant returned, he said, "Master, I've done what you told me, and there is still plenty of room for more people." His master then told him, "Go out along the back roads and fence rows and make people come in, so that my house will be full. Not one of the guests I first invited will get even a bite of my food!"

We've heard something similar a few days back. In this parable we hear the excuses people put up when they receive the invitation. Why would anyone not look at land *before* they bought it?! Oxen can wait, as can the marriage bed.

The greatest banquet of all time is being prepared for you. It will be the most lavish, the most abundant in provision, with every food you love prepared just for you. The Master of the Feast has an eye for detail. Your place-name will be engraved in the finest gold; your seat will be encrusted with the finest jewels (and a fine cushion so you don't chafe), and there, at the head of this banquet, will sit The Lamb, the Bridegroom, and we will understand that together we are His Bride.

Now would you be wanting to try out that new car you just bought, or check out the new extension when this invitation is to the Banquet of the King of Kings – no royal banquet can touch it. Jesus hints again that it's God's chosen people who are making the excuses, and that their casual responses will lose them their place.

In Jesus' time people like us would have been the ones Jesus' parable describes as incomplete or far away. We are now among the first invited guests. How might we respond to this request of Jesus to attend the wedding supper of all wedding suppers?

Isn't the extravagance of this Supper a little over the top?

Do we eat food in heaven?

Is there nothing else to do but eat and drink?

Father God, I have so many questions about heaven. Teach me and reveal to me how in your great love and kindness it is a wonderful and right thing to accept your lavish and overflowing provision. Amen.

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Advent: December 12

Luke 19:1-10

Jesus was going through Jericho, where a man named Zacchaeus lived. He was in charge of collecting taxes and was very rich. Jesus was heading his way, and Zacchaeus wanted to see what he was like. But Zacchaeus was a short man and could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree.

When Jesus got there, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, hurry down! I want to stay with you today." Zacchaeus hurried down and gladly welcomed Jesus.

Everyone who saw this started grumbling, "This man Zacchaeus is a sinner! And Jesus is going home to eat with him." Later that day Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "I will give half of my property to the poor. And I will now pay back four times as much to everyone I have ever cheated." Jesus said to Zacchaeus, "Today you and your family have been saved, because you are a true son of Abraham. The Son of Man came to look for and to save people who are lost."

Zacchaeus was the chief of all the tax collectors in Jericho. I can't begin to imagine how much money came his way, how much of the hard-earned cash from the toil of labourers, farmers, shepherds, vineyard workers, builders, carpenters, grocers, fishermen, boat-builders, tent-makers, and so on, came into his grasp. I don't think Zacchaeus' work was hard – he could employ someone to do the books, and possibly a henchman/woman or two to make sure the cash came in. We see him too often as a funny little man – is that realistic?

Again, something stirred. Perhaps this was the moment that God had prepared long ago for Zacchaeus, before he was even in his mother's womb. Did Jesus know who Zacchaeus was? How did he know his name? Had Jesus been in Jericho before? Or did the Holy Spirit prompt Jesus with the knowledge? One thing God knew was that Zacchaeus was a cheat, and he'd amassed more wealth than was due to him. Jesus did not need to tell Zacchaeus this – Zacchaeus openly confessed what he'd done. Was he fearful of being found out? I doubt that. I prefer to think that the presence of Jesus at his house, at his table, a most significant and intimate place, shone a light into his own heart, and revealed his sin.

Zacchaeus' response is more than generous. Paying back those he'd cheated, and this suggests to me that Zacchaeus knew exactly who he'd cheated, with four times the overcharge would cut a chunk out of Zacchaeus' wealth. This man did not leave his work. Having Jesus at table with him resulted in restoring him to a true Son of Abraham and an honest man.

Did God's plan for me start before I was born? How can I tell?

How do you feel when a known cheat comes to church?

Does God condemn tax collectors?

Father God, it is when I am surprised by evidence of your love and care for me that I am more able to respond to you. Make each day for me a surprise. Amen.

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Advent: December 13

John 2:1-11

Three days later Mary, the mother of Jesus, was at a wedding feast in the village of Cana in Galilee. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited and were there. When the wine was all gone, Mary said to Jesus, "They don't have any more wine."

Jesus replied, "Mother, my time hasn't yet come! You must not tell me what to do." Mary then said to the servants, "Do whatever Jesus tells you to do."

At the feast there were six stone water jars that were used by the people for washing themselves in the way that their religion said they must. Each jar held about twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus told the servants to fill them to the top with water. Then after the jars had been filled, he said, "Now take some water and give it to the man in charge of the feast."

The servants did as Jesus told them, and the man in charge drank some of the water that had now turned into wine. He did not know where the wine had come from, but the servants did.

He called the bridegroom over and said, "The best wine is always served first. Then after the guests have had plenty, the other wine is served. But you have kept the best until last!"

Jesus and his family were among the probably many guests at a wedding. Hospitality at events like these was something that the host would have saved up for. As much as the host knew his obligation to celebrate the marriage well with fine feasting, the guests also knew that they could expect it!

The host also knew that you don't save the best wine until last. After merriment sets in, and with it, a lessening of discernment, any old wine is everybody's best friend. We should dwell on the failure of the host to gauge the thirstiness of his guest for a moment, in order to sense the shame and the dishonour the host would have brought to the family had the wine run out – the guests would be talking and gossiping about it for generations (imagine the host's name is Ahab) –

"Darling, for goodness' sake get plenty of wine in for our daughter's wedding – remember Ahab?"

"When your neighbour's grandparents married, they ran out of wine. They've never lived it down."

"The whole village was shocked that Ahab had kept half of the wine for himself."

"That good-for-nothing Ahab always did do things on the cheap."

Shame expands into spaces where it had not existed before, through inventive re-telling of an event.

Mary senses the impending disaster. She tells Jesus. Jesus rebukes her, but Mary knows he'll do something. When Jesus orders 150 gallons of water to be poured into the ritual-washing jars the servants do, without question, as requested. Upon the pouring out of the water it is wine, fine wine, the very best wine. Jesus, in response to the hospitality offered him, blesses the host with

vast quantities of “previously undiscovered” wine, around 80 cases of the stuff in today’s measurements.

“We’ve never had a wedding since in the last fifty years anything like the one Ahab hosted – that was something else.”

Why didn’t Jesus just produce enough wine to keep the party going?

How generous is God? Do you base your answer on your experience or God’s promises?

Can you agree with Luke 6:38?

Father God, you long to lavish the very best upon us who honour you. How could You give us any less? Build up my expectation of your goodness and provision in all things that touch my life. Amen.

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Advent: December 14

Genesis 24:9-21

The servant gave Abraham his word that he would do everything he had been told to do. Soon after that, the servant loaded ten of Abraham's camels with valuable gifts. Then he set out for the city in northern Syria, where Abraham's brother Nahor lived. When he got there, he let the camels rest near the well outside the city.

It was late afternoon, the time when the women came out for water. The servant prayed: You, LORD, are the God my master Abraham worships. Please keep your promise to him and let me find a wife for Isaac today. The young women of the city will soon come to this well for water, and I'll ask one of them for a drink. If she gives me a drink and then offers to get some water for my camels, I'll know she is the one you have chosen and that you have kept your promise to my master.

While he was still praying, a beautiful unmarried young woman came by with a water jar on her shoulder. She was Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel, the son of Abraham's brother Nahor and his wife Milcah. Rebekah walked past Abraham's servant, then went over to the well, and filled her water jar.

When she started back, Abraham's servant ran to her and said, "Please let me have a drink of water." "I'll be glad to," she answered. Then she quickly took the jar from her shoulder and held it while he drank.

After he had finished, she said, "Now I'll give your camels all the water they want." She quickly poured out water for them, and she kept going back for more, until his camels had drunk all they wanted. Abraham's servant did not say a word, but he watched everything Rebekah did, because he wanted to know for certain if this was the woman the LORD had chosen.

You might care to read the opening of the chapter to get some introduction into this story. God rather enjoys carrying out his plan with hospitable acts in mind. It's not clear if God had prepared Rebekah like he'd prepared the widow of Zarephath. It's interesting that Abraham, having been promised by God that he would have innumerable descendants didn't seem to mind passing on the responsibility of choosing a wife for the next generation to a servant. What a task the servant had, never mind being responsible for a shed load of valuables!

The servant was prayerful over the task he had. He had no idea of what to do. His prayer is delightfully simple, and God's response to that prayer is more than confirmative. Rebekah is more than ready to offer the servant a drink. She might have dismissed him as being of a lower caste than her, but she didn't. She responded to the ancient law of hospitality, and even offered to water the camels. Matthew 10:42.

This was enough for the servant to believe. Rebekah had blessed him with kindness, and now he could move forward to approach her family.

We may as well deal with elephants – was there inbreeding, or did God want to keep the line of descendants pure? Perhaps we might look at Numbers 25 (ADVISORY: contains sexual references and violence!), which may or may not clear the issue, and the book of Ruth, with its small acts of kindness.

How important is it that we act out God's plan through hospitality on our part?

How would you respond to the accusation that Isaac and Rebekah are second cousins?

What nationality was Ruth, and why was she significant?

Father God, teach me to see and not miss opportunities for small acts of kindness and prompt me to act on them. Amen.

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Advent: December 15

John 4:3-30 (shortened)

Jesus sat down beside [the well]. It was noon, and a Samaritan woman came to draw water from the well. Jesus asked her, "Would you please give me a drink of water?" "You are a Jew," she replied, "and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink of water when Jews and Samaritans won't have anything to do with each other?" Jesus answered, "You don't know what God wants to give you, and you don't know who is asking you for a drink. If you did, you would ask me for the water that gives life."

...The woman replied, "Sir, please give me a drink of that water! Then I won't get thirsty and have to come to this well again."

Jesus told her, "Go and bring your husband." The woman answered, "I don't have a husband." "That's right," Jesus replied, "you're telling the truth. You don't have a husband. You have already been married five times, and the man you are now living with isn't your husband."

...God is Spirit, and those who worship God must be led by the Spirit to worship him according to the truth. The woman said, "I know that the Messiah will come. He is the one we call Christ. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." "I am that one," Jesus told her, "and I am speaking to you now." The disciples returned about this time and were surprised to find Jesus talking with a woman.

The woman left her water jar and ran back into town. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! Could he be the Messiah?" Everyone in town went out to see Jesus.

Jesus was an itinerant. He had no fixed place. He could not invite folks over for a meal. He relied on others to give him the things he needed. You may like to think about the long journeys he made from place to place with his disciples, journeys that could last days, away from their homes. Where did the food come from?

You ought to read the full story if you can – it is unfair to copyright holders to quote large chunks.

It's only water, not a banquet. The whole conversation comes from a sinful woman's act of kindness in giving water to someone she despised. Jesus had no means of drawing the water himself. She despised Jews, but she obeyed the ancient law. She didn't believe that this Jew could actually give her water that gives life, but as the conversation goes on, and Jesus reveals himself to the woman, her faith rises. For all her feistiness and religious identity she listens to Jesus. The clincher comes when Jesus discloses his knowledge of her married status and history.

The woman who responded to Jesus' request with a small act of hospitality became the recipient of something far, far greater.

Would you be prepared to tell the world that Jesus knew about your sinful acts?

Why did Jesus choose a disrespected woman who had little influence in her community?

Are you prepared to offer hospitality to someone you despise?

Father God, I won't always see the results of my giving to strangers, or to the charities who act on my behalf, but I know that you see every small act of kindness I make, and will reward it. Loosen my pocket/purse, Lord. Amen.

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Advent: December 16

John 7:37-44

On the last and most important day of the festival, Jesus stood up and shouted, "If you are thirsty, come to me and drink! Have faith in me, and you will have life-giving water flowing from deep inside you, just as the Scriptures say."

Jesus was talking about the Holy Spirit, who would be given to everyone that had faith in him. The Spirit had not yet been given to anyone, since Jesus had not yet been given his full glory.

When the crowd heard Jesus say this, some of them said, "He must be the Prophet!" Others said, "He is the Messiah!" Others even said, "Can the Messiah come from Galilee? The Scriptures say that the Messiah will come from the family of King David. Doesn't this mean that he will be born in David's hometown of Bethlehem?" The people started taking sides against each other because of Jesus.

Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid a hand on him.

Jesus tells it as it is, and he gets a mixed reaction. There's no encounter with a person, just a bold statement shouted out. Teachers usually sat to teach, but Jesus stands. It is likely that people listening would not necessarily understand what Jesus meant, but the teachers of the Law would.

Jesus was quoting from Isaiah chapter 55:

If you are thirsty, come and drink water! If you don't have any money, come, eat what you want! Drink wine and milk without paying a penny. Why waste your money on what really isn't food? Why work hard for something that doesn't satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and you will enjoy the very best foods.

And Jesus has claimed this scripture for himself. He has fulfilled it – "Come to me!" Those teachers that realised what Jesus had done would probably have taken a dim view – to their minds this would be blasphemy. It was probably not the best time to arrest Jesus, when emotions and religious fervour were running high on this special festival day.

Jesus is offering the Holy Spirit, symbolised, amongst other things, by running water. It is available to all who call on the name of Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Jesus doesn't talk about the milk and wine, attractive though they may seem in comparison to bland water, but the gift Jesus is offering is free and unlimited, ever flowing, and it reaches parts milk and wine simply cannot reach, and they will deteriorate rapidly. It is the ultimate quencher of thirst, the thing most needed in a dry and barren land, or in a life of faith that feels like it's crawling through the desert. An outpouring or an infilling of God's Holy Spirit refreshes and enables, empowers and emboldens us to do the work Jesus calls us to.

Many Christians live a life of faith but have no experience of the Living Water Jesus offers. They may be dutiful, obedient and attentive to prayer, bible-reading and living according to God's way for them. However, the prospect of being inundated is something they shy away from, standing at the side of the pool while others swim, or worse, like Pharisees considering those swimming to be irreverent and disorderly. Some may even claim that the source has now dried up. I believe it still to be wide open to anyone who has faith in him.

Jesus is risen, ascended and glorified. That turn of events has opened the floodgates of God's Holy Spirit. Jesus wants to set his Holy Spirit water-canon on us. He wants us to dive into the sparkling deep spring. He wants this water to flow from deep within us.

Are there areas of your life that still resist the call of Jesus?

Do you have the experience of Living Water?

If not, then who could you talk to?

Father God, You sent Jesus not only to raise us up to be kings and priests before you, but also to fill us to overflowing with your Holy Spirit. Fill me/fill me once more with your Holy Spirit so that I may be the person You have called me to be. Amen.

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Advent: December 17

Matthew 25:31-36

When the Son of Man comes in his glory with all of his angels, he will sit on his royal throne. The people of all nations will be brought before him, and he will separate them, as shepherds separate their sheep from their goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the king will say to those on his right, "My father has blessed you! Come and receive the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world was created. When I was hungry, you gave me something to eat, and when I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink. When I was a stranger, you welcomed me, and when I was naked, you gave me clothes to wear. When I was sick, you took care of me, and when I was in jail, you visited me."

I'm sure you know the script on this one. Those who are standing on the right are baffled that Jesus has said that they had looked after him. Jesus replies that in doing such things for any of God's people they had done it for him. The ones standing on the left are somewhat aggrieved that they get the opposite treatment – you did not visit me, etc. But they had done nothing for anyone.

While it's a simple story, helped by the two balancing scenarios, it states plainly and starkly that we are called to be hospitable. Hospitality is extended to include clothing the naked, caring for the sick and visiting the prisoners. Not all prisoners across this world are in prison for doing bad things.

We love what the Salvation Army does. It might be that we are glad that they're doing it so we don't have to. We might not like getting into the sort of places they go or dealing with the sort of people they deal with. We might not like regular commitment as it makes demands on our work, family and social life. Left side or right side – you choose.

Do you feed the hungry or give water to the thirsty? Yes/No

Do you welcome strangers? Yes/No

Do you clothe the naked? Yes/No

Do you care for the sick? Yes/No

Do you visit prisoners? Yes/No

Which of these does your church do?

Father God, I do not want to stand on the wrong side of You. If I or my church is found wanting in the care we offer to others then I confess my personal or our corporate failure before You. Help me put it right. Amen.

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Advent: December 18

Romans 12:13-21

Take care of God's needy people and welcome strangers into your home. Ask God to bless everyone who mistreats you. Ask him to bless them and not to curse them. When others are happy, be happy with them, and when they are sad, be sad. Be friendly with everyone. Don't be proud and feel that you are smarter than others. Make friends with ordinary people. Don't mistreat someone who has mistreated you. But try to earn the respect of others, and do your best to live at peace with everyone.

Dear friends, don't try to get even. Let God take revenge. In the Scriptures the Lord says, "I am the one to take revenge and pay them back." The Scriptures also say, "If your enemies are hungry, give them something to eat. And if they are thirsty, give them something to drink. This will be the same as piling burning coals on their heads." Don't let evil defeat you, but defeat evil with good.

Paul encourages his listeners to consider the needy, especially the needy of the new congregations of the "followers of The Way", as Christians were described in the early days. Some congregations were very poor, and Paul encouraged the other congregations to support them.

Paul echoes that which has been drummed into him from an early age – welcome strangers. I'd say that Paul spent quite a high proportion of his time in urban situations, unlike Abraham, but the rule of hospitality is still to be kept.

Paul now takes things to a higher level – we are to bless people who curse us. That's a far cry from God's promise to Abraham that He would bless those who blessed him, but curse those who cursed him. Now we see a positive change. A curse is on God's table, ready for delivery to those who curse us, but we may ask God to turn this round to a blessing. Imagine sending a blessing to someone who hates you. Imagine asking God to give them success in work, in life, in family after what they've done for you. But perhaps this is an odd form of hospitality. You break the cycle of retribution, giving to that person a blessing and receiving blessing from God.

Paul tells us to turn the other cheek, not because we like suffering, or consider it a religious duty. Neither of these attitudes will bring any blessing at all to you or the person who wronged you. In turning the other cheek we offer unconditional love to a person – it may be costly for us – but returning when we can an insult with a blessing will be part of a process that leads to the venom being drawn.

If your enemy is at a disadvantage, don't take the advantage. If they're down, don't kick them - pick them up! If he or she is hungry, then offer food. Crazy hospitality, but it will work! Your enemy will eventually be in debt to you, and that's as painful as having a shovelful of hot coals in their hat!

Defeat evil with good. What other way can evil be defeated? It's what Jesus did.

What can you do to welcome strangers, by yourself or with others?

Read 1 Corinthians 16:1-4. Do you know where does your church's money go?

Read 2 Corinthians 8:1-5. How does your church compare with the Macedonian Church?

Father God, I pray that you will protect your people from harm, and that, as we pray for the nation in which we live, you will grant us a quiet life. For those churches in other countries where there is state or religious oppression, I pray that we who are

comfortable remember those who are not. May my church be like the Macedonian church in giving and supporting. Give strength and grace to all those who suffer for their faith. Amen.

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Advent: December 19

Luke 10:38-42

The Lord and his disciples were traveling along and came to a village. When they got there, a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat down in front of the Lord and was listening to what he said. Martha was worried about all that had to be done.

Finally, she went to Jesus and said, "Lord, doesn't it bother you that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to come and help me!" The Lord answered, "Martha, Martha! You are worried and upset about so many things, but only one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen what is best, and it will not be taken away from her."

We all know this story, perhaps so well that we may forget to dwell on it. If your response to hearing or reading a passage of scripture is to say, "I've already heard that one", then you are in danger of seriously missing out. The Holy Spirit releases truth as we delve into scripture, reading it, reciting it, hearing it. The more we do these things, the more the Holy Spirit reveals the truth that lies behind the words. At first reading it may seem that Mary's good, and Martha's the wrong 'un, but we will still feel a little uneasy about it because we're probably on Martha's side!

Perhaps we accept that Martha may have stepped out of line, and that we should all be sitting at Jesus' feet, because Jesus told Martha that Mary had done the better thing. But the question still remains: can a potato peel itself?

Martha knew the ancient law of hospitality. It wasn't only Jesus who turned up that day – his disciples were there, too. I don't suppose they'd brought any food with them, or stopped off at the take-away on the way over. Here was a crowd that needed feeding, and over in the kitchen (in the possibly one-roomed house!) was Martha doing what she knew was the right and proper thing.

She was overwhelmed. I don't think she was overwhelmed with anger with her sister or with Jesus, but she was being swallowed up in the waves of duty, trying to do the work of two. She may be feeling a little self-righteous - she addresses Jesus and not her sister. (Where else do we hear people speaking like this to Jesus?) If Mary had walked away from her duty of hospitality, why not speak to her directly? It's never a good idea to address Jesus from the position of your own self-righteousness.

Jesus speaks kindly to her – he would never abuse his host, and he simply tells Martha the truth – Mary has done the better thing.

Many Christians will describe themselves as a Martha, identifying with the pull of duty and the shame of failing to provide, rather than as a Mary. Anyone presenting as a Mary in your fellowship may not be universally accepted by the Martha faction. Can the church flowers arrange themselves?

What would have happened if both sisters came to Jesus' feet?

What would have happened if both sisters got on with the cooking?

Was Mary the one who knew better in all things?

What is the one thing that Jesus says is necessary?

Father God, so often I chose the busy thing, the duty thing, or in fact anything that will keep me from coming into your presence and sitting at your feet. Warm my heart, Lord. Amen.

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Advent: December 20

Matthew 15:29-38

From there, Jesus went along Lake Galilee. Then he climbed a hill and sat down. Large crowds came and brought many people who were crippled or blind or lame or unable to talk. They placed them, and many others, in front of Jesus, and he healed them all. Everyone was amazed at what they saw and heard. People who had never spoken could now speak. The lame were healed, the crippled could walk, and the blind were able to see. Everyone was praising the God of Israel.

Jesus called his disciples together and told them, "I feel sorry for these people. They have been with me for three days, and they don't have anything to eat. I don't want to send them away hungry. They might faint on their way home." His disciples said, "This place is like a desert. Where can we find enough food to feed such a crowd?" Jesus asked them how much food they had. They replied, "Seven small loaves of bread and a few little fish."

After Jesus had told the people to sit down, he took the seven loaves of bread and the fish and gave thanks. He then broke them and handed them to his disciples, who passed them around to the crowds. Everyone ate all they wanted, and the leftovers filled seven large baskets. There were four thousand men who ate, not counting the women and children.

We are familiar with the story of the five thousand hungry people. This is another one. What was the miracle? That four thousand people have been fed? There's a far greater thing going on – large crowds had brought many people who were crippled, blind, lame or dumb. Jesus healed every single one of them. People were restored to mobility, blind eyes could see and deaf ears were opened.

Food was probably not on the minds of the crowds. They had seen this amazing man Jesus heal a son, a father, a mother, a friend. They had seen crippled limbs return to full functionality. Blind people were seeing. Deaf people were beginning to figure out what language and speech are all about. They were all praising God.

Jesus expresses concern about the people's welfare. They would be getting hungry. The disciples have some rations. I'm not sure I'd want to eat fish or bread that has been in a bag for three days in a desert place. Both would be rather dry. You wouldn't see a miracle like this today if food safety officers had turned up on the scene. From these meagre rations Jesus provided food enough to feed four thousand men and their wives and families. A lesser miracle than feeding five thousand? I'd rejoice if I could feed twenty people from those rations!

Jesus takes rough and tired elements and turns them into a feast. Again we see Jesus' extravagance and lavish hospitality as seven baskets of leftover pieces are collected – I'd love to know what they were going to do with those basketfuls!

As to the question I posed yesterday: Lord, don't you care that we're going to drown? (Mark4:38)

Could we see this miracle today?

Would you climb a hill to see Jesus?

Would you stay three days (that's longer than Mary stayed with Jesus)?

Would you dare to take a disabled person with you, with an expectation of healing?

Father God, teach me how to trust in your abundant, extravagant and lavish provision for me and those I love. For too long I have held back, refusing any more than my imperfect human mind and my weak faith considers to be sufficient and not wasteful. Amen.

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Advent: December 21

Luke 15:11-32

Jesus also told them another story: Once a man had two sons. The younger son said to his father, "Give me my share of the property." So the father divided his property between his two sons. Not long after that, the younger son packed up everything he owned and left for a foreign country, where he wasted all his money in wild living. He had spent everything, when a bad famine spread through that whole land. Soon he had nothing to eat. He went to work for a man in that country, and the man sent him out to take care of his pigs. He would have been glad to eat what the pigs were eating, but no one gave him a thing. Finally, he came to his senses and said, "My father's workers have plenty to eat, and here I am, starving to death! I will go to my father and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against God in heaven and against you. I am no longer good enough to be called your son. Treat me like one of your workers.' "

The younger son got up and started back to his father. But when he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt sorry for him. He ran to his son and hugged and kissed him. The son said, "Father, I have sinned against God in heaven and against you. I am no longer good enough to be called your son." But his father said to the servants, "Hurry and bring the best clothes and put them on him. Give him a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. Get the best calf and prepare it, so we can eat and celebrate. This son of mine was dead, but has now come back to life. He was lost and has now been found."

This parable of Jesus' is a masterpiece. It tells of Father's ridiculous love for a wasteful wretch. We may be left feeling a little aggrieved at how the younger son's wasteful behaviour has actually brought shame to his family, or how the other son's inheritance (for Father has given away half of his property and possessions on the waster) is now being spent on the returned waster. We may even feel that the older son won't have the same inheritance as his younger brother as there'd be nothing left.

If we feel this way then we are missing the meaning behind the parable, and are taking it too literally. For a start, our Father God has limitless resources. He is aware that we might waste them, or, like the older son, not even avail ourselves of them. After all, didn't Apostle Paul say that if a man does not work he should not eat?! Does not that set the tone of our relationship with God?

Yes, we can be miserable if we want – if we ask for nothing we will get nothing, and that's as good as God can give us. Nothing, even when blessed by being pressed down and filled to the brim, still amounts to nothing. What if we start asking for something that we think, in our misguided humility, is more than we deserve? What if we ask God to bless us, to favour us in our work, our leisure, our skills, our income? He'd love to do that, but could we ask?

Father God restores me when I have wasted my inheritance. It's not automatic. I must return, like the younger son, and confess, knowing that my desire is to be back with the God I abandoned. While I at times may consider myself not to be God's son because I'm not worthy, God himself does not know any relationship with me other than as Father. I really know that I am a child of God by adoption when I return to the One whose love, demonstrated to me through the blood of His Son Jesus, pulls me back with open arms though I deserve nothing. I cannot express in words how much my Father God loves me. Every time I repent of anything Father God sets out a feast.

Do you stand tall in your Father's house?

Do you live in the inheritance of God's riches?

Do you dare not ask God for things, for fear of being seen to be greedy?

Do you know complete forgiveness in God through Jesus' blood?

Do you know how much it cost God to give you free forgiveness?

Do you keep repenting the same thing each week? Why?

What are you still concealing from God?

Father God, you are more generous than I could ever ask or imagine. Teach me that your most generous gift, rich beyond measure, has already been poured out when Jesus died for me. Nothing compares with this. Thank you, Father. Amen.

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Advent: December 22

Luke 16:19-31

There was once a rich man who wore expensive clothes and every day ate the best food. But a poor beggar named Lazarus was brought to the gate of the rich man's house. He was happy just to eat the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. His body was covered with sores, and dogs kept coming up to lick them. The poor man died, and angels took him to the place of honour next to Abraham.

The rich man also died and was buried. He went to hell and was suffering terribly. When he looked up and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side, he said to Abraham, "Have pity on me! Send Lazarus to dip his finger in water and touch my tongue. I'm suffering terribly in this fire."

Abraham answered, "My friend, remember that while you lived, you had everything good, and Lazarus had everything bad. Now he is happy, and you are in pain. And besides, there is a deep ditch between us, and no one from either side can cross over." But the rich man said, "Abraham, then please send Lazarus to my father's home. Let him warn my five brothers, so they won't come to this horrible place."

Abraham answered, "Your brothers can read what Moses and the prophets wrote. They should pay attention to that." Then the rich man said, "No, that's not enough! If only someone from the dead would go to them, they would listen and turn to God." So Abraham said, "If they won't pay attention to Moses and the prophets, they won't listen even to someone who comes back from the dead."

The rich man showed no respect to the laws of hospitality – he may have feasted with those like him, or with his family, but he ignored the plight of the poor. The poor man Lazarus made no fuss, and presumably saw being able to eat some scraps that fell from the rich man's table – perhaps it's a form of gleaning. He even put up with the dogs.

Obviously, this is a story Jesus made up, though in our world there are millions like Lazarus and many like the rich man. We have to go back to Isaiah 58 to remember what God said about people in need:

I'll tell you what it really means to worship the LORD. Remove the chains of prisoners who are chained unjustly. Free those who are abused! Share your food with everyone who is hungry; share your home with the poor and homeless.

The demands of this verse are great. Read each part and ask yourself if you are doing what God has told us we should do. We should feel uncomfortable if we do not respond in any way. God will not be ready to accept any hands or voices raised up in worship from those who care only about themselves. I do not want to turn up to a worship meeting and be all cosy with God when I'm ignoring injustice in the real world.

Will there be fire and suffering for the ungodly? All I know is this – there's none where I'm going, and, rather than argue about what hell is like with those who think it's a myth and a joke, I'm simply proclaiming the higher place. Accentuate the positive.

What should we, individually or through our churches and fellowships, be saying to our government regarding justice?

We are being made aware of the sexual abuse carried out by priests and others in churches. Should I care if it wasn't in my denomination?

How do I respond to the (ever-present - Matthew 26:11) poor, the homeless, those unable to cope, the fatherless, the widows, the orphans, the abused, the prisoners, the oppressed? Where do I start? Do those "at home" deserve my charity more?

Father God, the door to heaven is open to all those who call on the Name of Jesus. I might now sit down and do nothing else, but You call me to be part of your work of salvation. Use me, Lord, for your purposes, as an ambassador of Christ Jesus in this fallen world. Amen.

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Advent: December 23

Revelation 19:6-10

Then I heard what seemed to be a large crowd that sounded like a roaring flood and loud thunder all mixed together. They were saying, "Praise the Lord! Our Lord God All-Powerful now rules as king. So we will be glad and happy and give him praise. The wedding day of the Lamb is here, and his bride is ready. She will be given a wedding dress made of pure and shining linen. This linen stands for the good things God's people have done."

Then the angel told me, "Put this in writing. God will bless everyone who is invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb." The angel also said, "These things that God has said are true."

I knelt at the feet of the angel and began to worship him. But the angel said, "Don't do that! I am a servant, just like you and everyone else who tells about Jesus. Don't worship anyone but God. Everyone who tells about Jesus does it by the power of the Spirit."

So this is what heaven is like. No nooks, no quiet rooms, no denominations, no clubs (and you may as well forget the golf clubs, too!). I'm sure we have an ideal of what we'd like heaven to be. At a recent funeral I conducted the young grandsons told the assembled mourners that Grandad would be having a quiet cigarette and a whisky – to them that would be heaven.

The difficulty I have in describing heaven is that it is beyond my imagination, and certainly beyond words, as any reader of the Book of Revelation will confess. Think of something amazing – heaven will be better than that. Think of the best meal you've ever had, and Grandma's apple pie – heaven will be better than that, and there'll be no gluttony or indigestion. Think of the best loving relationships – the host will know us better than anyone has ever known us, and we'll also know him better, and everyone else at the feast, too. Think of the best holiday experience you've had. Heaven beats any of them.

And so on, and so on, into eternity...

The marriage feast, the wedding supper of the Lamb is the best act of hospitality ever. God has prepared an eternal feast for his Son, Christ Jesus, the Lamb of God. It's a wedding feast, better than that at Cana, better than the earthly feasts in Jesus' parables which are all hinting at this feast to end all feasts. Jesus is the Bridegroom, and the Church is the Bride.

The Church is the gathering of all believers from across the world over the centuries. It consists of all those who have committed themselves to Christ as a bride does to her groom (and vice versa) on her wedding-day. We will come together to celebrate this union.

This is not a private function. All are invited. Remember, however, the parable of the bridesmaids. All were invited, but half of them had not prepared themselves. The door was shut to them.

How do I get tickets for my as yet uninvited friends?

Who will invite those who haven't yet heard?

Will we remember in heaven the ones who did not make the feast?

How do I tell others about it?

Father God, I cannot get my created head around Your eternity. An eternal marriage supper is way beyond my comprehension, but You know that. Would You reveal through your Holy Spirit a better understanding of all these things and inspire in me a deep desire to see my family, my friends, my colleagues and those You bring me into contact with come into a true faith in Your love shown in Christ Jesus. In his name. Amen.

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Advent: December 24

1 Peter 4:8-9

Most important of all, you must sincerely love each other, because love wipes away many sins. Welcome people into your home and don't grumble about it.

You'll probably be busy today, so our last reflection will be a little shorter.

I like Peter's, or at least the translator's down-to-earth nature. Peter has been there, and done it, and now he expresses everything within the context of love. Show some love this Christmas, but remember that love is not just for Christmas.

Who could you invite to your home? Not sure? Then pray about it.

How will you celebrate Christ's birth at home?

Father God, because of Jesus You now welcome me into your family as an adopted child, with all the riches of inheritance offered to me. Prompt me to share this amazing gift with those I meet. Amen.

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If you'd like to spend a little more time in reflection, then you may like to read the passage from the opening of John's Gospel, verses 1 to 14. As you read, remember that this is an opening to a Gospel that is very different from the openings of the other three. Mark goes to John the Prophet, Luke and Matthew include Jesus' birth.

Matthew considers it important to place Jesus' earthly heritage on record, writing a long list of forebears, but John tells us of Jesus' heavenly status, and gives us this wonderful passage.

You may know the old version of it if you've done a few Nine Lessons services over the years, but I would recommend reading it out of that context and in a different translation. Here are some links to versions as found on BibleGateway.com, and there are plenty of other translations to find there:

[The Message Bible](#)

[Good News Bible](#)

[The Voice](#)

[The Passion Translation](#)

[New Living Translation](#)