

Hinde Street Methodist Church

1 September 2019 10.00am

Rev Peter Cornick

Guest or Host

As Superintendent, I have been invited to a number of meals, and ones I have particularly enjoyed, have been those with our Chinese friends at Kings Cross. They have been quite different to the Chinese Take Aways I am used to – due in part to the regional variation and styles of cooking, but due mostly I'm sure, to the tremendous sense of hospitality I have felt. I have learnt that the Chinese share the various plates of food enhancing fellowship – the British individual serving is – well, individual.

But I have noticed something as I have eaten in fellowship groups in houses or meals in the church. I'm not sure if I am guest or host.

Eating in someone's house, I sat where I was told and ate what was placed in front of me, But I was also aware that the assembly seemed to be waiting for me to start – looking for my opinion in the Bible study. I was it seemed, an honoured guest at least – if not in some ways, the host. My efforts to subvert this by asking the people questions, or encouraging them to eat, seemed to generate a clash of cultures which was never expressed, but was nevertheless present.

Was I guest or host?

In church, a similar feeling arose at a meal. I felt honoured to be eating with another culture – using chop sticks rather than a fork to try and show an empathy with them. But my presence altered the occasion. Later, I had a conversation with someone about this sense

that I was unsure if I was guest or host. I am of course, British – whereas those I was eating with are of Chinese origin, and mostly immigrants. We explored whether I was being perceived as the host being British, by guests to the UK. Was there a deference going on, even if unacknowledged, due to my being white British with all the historical baggage that brings? Or was there a deference going on due to my being Superintendent. Even when one is trying to be inclusive and equal, and showing humility in respect for another culture, it is easy to see how contracts of power and status are sub-consciously being exchanged.

Was I guest or host?

Was Jesus guest or host?

Jesus was at the home of a leading Pharisee. Luke observes that the people were watching Jesus closely. Why might that be? The day was a Sabbath, and in a part of this scripture that the lectionary curiously leaves out, Jesus heals a man, and provokes the pharisees. He asks them, is it against our Law to heal a man on the Sabbath? He has recently caused insult by suggesting to them that they enjoy the status of being seen in the market places, and take the best seats in the synagogues.

Jesus is pushing the boundaries of how to be a good guest – but I his purpose is to teach the kingdom of God.

And at these gatherings, conversation is key. To recline at table next to the main rabbi or teacher, means one is at a place of learning or influence. To be placed at the foot of a U shaped table means, one is out of the conversation.

How many times have you been out with a group, and the conversation seems much more interesting somewhere else?

Jesus observes that people are turning up to the meal and going to the place of honour, of interest, near to the host – the main speaker. The pharisees would have agreed with him: to do so is inviting shame. If you are asked to move, it would be embarrassing. Better to start in a humble position, and be invited closer to the host.

Some wise teaching indeed.

But Jesus isn't finished. He turns now on the Pharisees again, and provokes them. One can imagine the great and the good of the town and the synagogue dining together. Jesus observes: if one invites these rich and well off people, what is the motive? To be invited back to their dinner party? To strike some business deal? Why not, invite the poor, the lame, the blind. They cannot invite you back. And you will be blessed. You will gain righteousness with God.

A different sort of dinner party. But Jesus is trying to demonstrate who might be invited to the feast in the kingdom of God. And it is not who the Pharisees had in mind. Because Jesus deliberately refers to people the Pharisees believed were unclean according to the Law. Jesus then, a good rabbi himself, is re-interpreting the Law and challenging the religious leaders of his day. Who do you think, would be welcome in the kingdom of God? Because my list of guests and yours are not the same.

Jesus has become the main centre of learning at this dinner party. He has challenged the host. Jesus, the guest, becomes the host.

And here, at this table, Jesus, is our guest today, and comes to teach us about the kingdom of God, as host of the feast.