

**Second Sunday after Trinity 2017 Evensong**

**1 Samuel 24: 1 – 17; Luke 14: 12 – 24**

I realise that not everybody who is in church this evening had to cope with wrestling with my sermon this morning. But we had a very challenging Gospel reading and it led to a very challenging sermon. So all I wanted to do this evening was find some warm words to complement the choir so we can leave church on a summer's evening, replete from Choral Evensong and reassured that God is in his heaven, all is well with the world, and an evening of undemanding Sunday night TV with a glass of wine awaits us.

I'm not entirely sure it's going to work out like that – although I'm sure a glass of wine will feature at some point in the evening – because the fact is that this evening's readings are pretty challenging as well. They certainly shake us out of our comfort zone. What greater liturgical feast could there be than Aylward responses, Harwood and A flat and then Finzi *and*

Matthias, both in the same service? And then you wonder what the poor, the cripples, the blind and the lame of Bridlington, whom God will insist on inviting, are going to make of it.

All churches seek to be welcoming. I can't imagine there is a church anywhere that says that, actually, it doesn't want to welcome anybody. So churches put up great big banners over their doors to proclaim how friendly and hospitable they are. You see them all over. They say "Come and join us!" The problem is, though, that every word (except "and"! ) in that slogan proclaims a subliminal message that says the opposite of what people intend.

First of all it asserts that there is us, and then there is you. And you are not us; you cannot be us, because to be us you have to come and join us, and you've not yet done that. So you remain you and we remain us with a gulf between us. And in order to bridge that gulf you've got to do all the work. It's you that's got to

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do the coming and it's you that's got to do the joining. There's no reaching out, there's no meeting half way: we remain us behind these doors and to become us you've got to take the initiative, open them and walk through. And if you take the initiative, the onus is still upon you to do the joining. You've got to comply and conform to become one of us. And so long as you are prepared to join in, follow the rules on our terms, then you're welcome. Perhaps the signs ought to say "Everybody is welcome to disrupt us, to challenge us, to change us and to make us face up to the image of Christ in the face of people who are utterly different to ourselves" – perhaps even people who don't like Finzi and Matthias, if you can force yourself to believe such people exist.

But actually this is not all doom and gloom. Because actually that is the point about church in general and Priory in particular. When the Free Press ran a profile of me a few weeks ago and I was trying to express what was exciting about being at the Priory, what I said was

that, unlike any other organisation, Priory is a place where everybody comes together, of all ages, from all different backgrounds and all are welcome and all are met on equal terms. Priory is here for everybody. Nobody isn't good enough, nobody isn't religious enough, nobody hasn't got over some notional spiritual threshold in order to be here.

A fortnight ago the Old Town Association had the 1940s Festival. It was heaving with people. And by 11.15/11.30am people were pouring into church whilst the service was going on. There were people milling round the back, looking at displays, admiring the architecture; and in the midst of it all I elevated the host and we celebrated that Christ was present with us.

I think it was one of the most exciting pieces of applied sacramental, incarnational theology I have ever encountered. People had come in from the streets and lanes of the town, people who hadn't known a banquet

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was being prepared for them, and God's house was filled. It was distracting, it challenged our sense of propriety and it was absolutely wonderful: church was being church and not just a religious club for like-minded people.

A few weeks ago I visited a church on an outer-city council estate. There were barren rows of flimsy looking 1960s/1970s houses and maisonettes, the sort of places people from the city centre had been dumped in after slims had been cleared. I'm tempted to describe it as a Godforsaken place, but the point is that's precisely what it wasn't. Every other agency had forsaken it. There was no pub, no shop, no post office, no bank. But in the middle of it, vandalised and beleaguered, was the church: running kids clubs, a food bank, cookery courses, a second hand clothes shop, breaking open God's word and sharing bread together. This church wasn't the most ravishing example of 1960s architecture. In fact one of its problems is that people don't realise it's a church:

they think it's a crematorium! But, once again, people were coming in from the streets and lanes of the town and were finding a feast prepared for them.

So, Poldark's on at 9.00 o'clock, we've still got a voluntary by Matthias to come and then let's go home with some good news stories and rejoice that the Lord is here, his Spirit is with us.

Amen.