

MATERIAL FOR HOLY WEEK 2020

Tuesday – Luke 22.14-23

"Love bade me welcome", is probably one of George Herbert's best-known poems. As you read it you can so easily picture yourself in a seventeenth-century dining room, the hall of the Vicarage at Bemerton perhaps with Herbert as your host, a hall in one of the town houses in Salisbury into which Herbert would be invited after Evensong in the Cathedral. A guest invited into the hall, invited to sit and eat with the family.

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

But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lack'd anything.

A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:
 Love said, You shall be he.

I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
 I cannot look on thee.

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
 Who made the eyes but I?

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

And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
 My dear, then I will serve.

You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat.
 So I did sit and eat.

Love III, page 89

There are so many bible references that Herbert's 17th century readers, and those of us in the 21st century, will pick up. From the Old Testament, Psalm 23 verse 5 "thou hast prepared a table before me" and Song of Songs 2 verse 4 "He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love". From the gospels, the parable of the Wedding banquet - Luke 12.37 "Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them."

The image of the master being the servant - the nearest I can get to it is when Diane, the landlady of the Red Cow, brings the Sunday roast to our table.

Perhaps I should have chosen this poem yesterday as we read about the preparations for the Passover Feast. This was the big feast of the year, and meals take preparation. If the disciples had been at home, their wives, their mothers, would have done the preparation - but they were in Jerusalem. Jesus has it arranged. Look for a man carrying water - that was unusual, carrying water was a woman's work - he will lead you to the room where we will eat. An element of mystery, it does make you wonder why Jesus didn't simply say "Lads, I've booked a table at the Hanging Gate, table for 13, Thursday night." Presumably one of his other followers, perhaps Mark's family - was he a young man helping out, the man who followed to the Garden to see what happened, the young man who wriggle out of his robe as a soldier made a grab at him (that's mentioned in Mark's Gospel), the man who became an evangelist? Who knows? Together the meal was prepared.

For one disciple, preparations were being made of a different kind. Judas goes to the chief priests and officers of the temple police - I don't like the use of the word 'police', sounds too modern - and makes arrangements. "Satan entered him" we're told, we know the power of sin. Perhaps Judas was hoping that by forcing the pace he might get Jesus to take action, to be the Messiah he wanted him to be, perhaps he had just had enough of it all.

The guest, one of those invited to the meal, is "guilty of dust and sin" - of course, all of those invited to the meal, are "guilty of dust and sin". We are all descended from Adam, we are all sinners, we are all mortal, "dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return" to remind ourselves of Ash Wednesday. Judas was not the only sinner at the Passover meal, not the only sinner to be offered bread and wine by our Lord.

No guest is worthy to be here - but we are all worthy, because we are made in the image of God. I am unkind, ungrateful, how can I look on God? And Love replies "Who made the eyes but I?" - what a lovely pun. I enjoy the fact that Love replies with a smile, our God is a God with a smile - and when we arrive for a meal, we expect our host to greet us and smile at us. If I walk into a cafe or a pub, I expect to be greeted with a smile. I expect the person behind the counter, the bar, to be glad to see me. It doesn't matter how good the food is, if there is no welcome, I won't go back. (The same can be said of our churches).

In the poem the guest is guilty, he knows his sin - just as, I'm sure, Judas must today have wondered if what he was doing was right. Human sin mars the vision of God, pains the love of God, we do not deserve to sit in his presence. I

do find myself wondering how Jesus managed to greet Judas as he arrived on Thursday evening. How he managed to greet any of his friends, knowing where the meal was leading, and what would follow it. He knew the price he had to pay for human sin.

God welcomes us, we are redeemed by Christ, by his divine taking upon himself of human sin and punishment - "And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?"

You, we, are loved and forgiven, we are invited to share the heavenly banquet.
"You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat. So I did sit and eat."

John Tavener has set this poem to music, and there is a setting sung by the Choir of St John's College, Cambridge, directed by Christopher Robinson, at [youtube.com/watch?v=P86b65W3LcE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P86b65W3LcE)

You probably want the text of the poem in front of you while you listen to it.

Peter Barham, 6 April 2020