

Invitations

A sermon preached at St Peter's Wolvercote on Maundy Thursday, 5 April 2007 by the Revd Viv Bridges.

At our service for the Annunciation, Mark talked about the different 'invitations' that God offers us. Then we were remembering God's invitation to Mary to receive his Son, and tonight's celebration reveals a number of different invitations.

Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, and told them that they must follow his example. He makes two invitations. One is to all those who feel themselves to be privileged in some way, or who feel they should always be served by others. He invites them to put away all pride, all earthly status, and be prepared to serve those who need service - whoever they are. The other invitation seems opposite to the first - Jesus invites *everyone* to allow him to wash their feet. Peter found this difficult, and there are many people who find it very difficult to let anyone do anything for them. People can be too proud to accept help, or take great pride in being the one who always serves - always gives help. It means that they are never beholden to anyone, they always have control. But Christ asks us to put away all sorts of pride, not only in order to serve others, but also to allow ourselves to be served when appropriate.

After this Eucharist, we take the reserved sacrament to the Garden of Rest, and we recall Christ's agony in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus made a very specific invitation to Peter, James and John, to watch with him. For me this is one of the most amazing moments in the Gospels. The Son of God - who could call on his Father to send angels to rescue him - chose to empty himself of his divinity, and suddenly understood the awful reality of that choice. So he was frightened - and, perhaps, tempted to walk away. Wrestling with this was agony. So Christ knew the depth of human vulnerability, and needed the human companionship of his friends. So it seems to me that, through his disciples, he is asking US to watch with him. He wants MY COMPANY! Wow!

So, it seems, there are again two invitations. Christ invites us to be still, put everything aside, and watch with him, to watch with others when they suffer; and, by his example, he shows us how to accept our own vulnerability, and accept that other invitation to allow ourselves to *be served*.

And, of course, tonight we remember Christ's first invitation to come to the table and receive his body and blood. Christ broke the bread and poured out the wine and 'served' his disciples. Through this he has taught us how we could commemorate his sacrifice of himself, and how we can receive him, even though he is no longer with us in human form. But Christ's invitation to his table, to receive the gift of himself, holds with it an invitation to share in his suffering, and a commandment to love other people. Not everyone will have to go through the sort of suffering that Christ endured in order to show love, but everyone has to be willing to do so if it is God's will. So it's not surprising, then, that so many people refuse his invitation.

But this isn't the only reason for refusing Christ. On Passion Sunday Paul spoke of people 'making excuses' when they hear God calling them. Many people feel that they have no need of Christ in their lives, or they are too busy to pay him any attention. None of these people will be worshipping in Church tonight - or, sadly, on Easter Day. But there are others who feel they have no 'right' to come to receive Christ, to receive communion. They have such a sense of their own unworthiness

that they daren't approach. Of course they are unworthy, we are all unworthy. There is no way in which anyone can make themselves 'worthy'. But Christ spoke of a *new* covenant, a new relationship. The old covenant did depend on obeying the rules, 'earning' salvation. But Christ's new way is one of love. He wants to pour out his love – including his forgiveness - upon us, and what he asks – longs for – is that we love him in return, whoever, whatever, we are. And so, not only do we have to lay down our pride before God, we even have to lay down our fear, and our feelings of guilt and sinfulness if they prevent us from responding to Christ's invitation.

I believe, then, that God's invitation, offered through his Son, is to *surrender* to his overwhelming love. To come to him in prayer, to listen to his word, to receive his body and his blood or his blessing *just as we are*. To put aside any attempt to be in control, worthy; to come open and empty, so that we can truly receive all the gifts he wants to give us. Then we shall be strengthened to take up his other invitation to move out into the world, to serve, or to be served.

George Herbert understood the resistance we can put up to God's love, using our failures as an excuse, and expressed it in his poem, Love Bade me Welcome. The poem also expresses that amazing moment when we realise we are powerless and simply have to give in – to surrender to God's outstretched arms.

LOVE BADE ME WELCOME

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, the 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.

George Herbert (1593-1633)