

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

THE SELF-SUFFICIENCY DELUSION

28th August 2016

Jeremiah 2:4-13

Luke 14:7-14

When I was a teenager I was a member of the Scottish Baptist Youth Choir, which used to meet for weekends of rehearsal in different locations around Scotland, give a concert on the Saturday night and then participate in the Sunday morning service. A biography of that part of my life might be entitled "Church Hall I have Slept in." On one of these weekends, somewhere in the suburbs around Glasgow, though I can't remember which – perhaps fortunately – there were problems with the rather ancient plumbing. Probably fine for the limited use it usually got, when the four toilets were in constant use by over forty young people, they gave up the ghost. That Sunday morning, as it happened, one of the hymns we sang in the service – not one you will find in CH4 – contained the never-to-be-forgotten verse:

*"I tried the broken cisterns, Lord,
But ah, the waters failed.
And even as I stooped to drink
They mocked me and I wailed!"*

You can imagine the effect on over-excited and lavatorially challenged teenagers!

But this remarkably bad poetry had its origins in the word of God through Jeremiah, when he spoke to the people of Israel about their unfaithfulness to God. Jeremiah shows them God's astonishment that they, who have been shown his love and favour above all other people, should value it so lowly and turn so easily from it. They preferred to live their lives for themselves, rather than in relationship with and obedience to God, and we need not judge them for this, because that has been the human condition since the Garden of Eden. And God looks at his beloved people and through his prophet he says "My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water." (Jeremiah 2:13)

God offers living water, fresh and flowing refreshment, which in a parched land would be the more appreciated. And of course this is a metaphor for more than water, it is a metaphor for a full and flowing life, with every need satisfied and with the joy of being what we were created to be. But people thought that they could do all right if they just trapped the insufficient rain water in cisterns, where it could go stale, and drink that instead. They thought that they could work out for themselves what a full and proper life would be like, they thought that they could do for themselves as well as God could do for them. It would be a poor substitute for the living water, and in any case the plan did

not work, because when the people turned from God to plan and do for themselves, their work was full of holes.

I tried the broken cisterns, Lord, but ah, the waters failed..."

You may wonder what Jeremiah's diatribe against the people has to do with Jesus' visit to the Pharisee's house for dinner. Jesus watched the guests trying to get into the best seats at the table. Obviously there was no seating plan, no cards to say who sat where and no word from the host to help sort people out. So everyone was trying to get near the host, which would be the place of honour. And Jesus told them a parable.

It doesn't sound like a parable, though. It sounds like good social advice. Don't sit in the best place without being invited to do so, because you may find that you will be publicly shamed by having to get up and go lower down the pecking order. It is better to take the worst place and then have the host come to you and, have everyone hear him say to you "Friend, move up higher." As I say, it sounds like social advice. But as social advice, it doesn't sound like Jesus. It is hard to imagine Jesus seriously advising such convoluted, self-serving, duplicitous thinking! But then we remember that Luke says that it is a parable. It is a story or an illustration with a wider meaning. And if he is not talking about table places, what is that wider meaning?

I think he is talking about the way we see ourselves, about pride and humility. It was pride that he observed in those guests who were choosing places of honour for themselves. This was what they wanted and they were going straight for it. Maybe they had a great sense of their own self-worth and couldn't imagine that anyone would doubt their right to the place of honour. Or maybe, more likely perhaps, they were racked by self-doubt, and went for the better places with a kind of brave desperation, so that no one would think that they hesitated, that they were not sure of their standing in their current company. Either way, they were acting from pride. Because pride is that habit of mind that thinks more about ourselves than about other people.

What Jesus wants his followers to do is to think more about others than about themselves. And so his little parable is perhaps just a shade sarcastic. He is pointing out that if people take the lowest place hoping to be raised then they are also acting from motives of pride, they are also thinking more about themselves than about others.

And then he moves to talk to his host and tells him that really when he wants to give a luncheon, he should invite those who could never repay him. That way he will really be giving his meal, not just lending it. That way he will be sure to be thinking less about himself and more about his guests. Mind you, it is not an easy command to fulfil literally.

In our last parish in Stow, in the Borders, one of the elders was a young man who had trained as a joiner and cabinetmaker. In his kitchen was a very large refectory-style table which he had built there – in fact when he and his wife moved away from the village they had to sell the table with the house. At one point this man got to thinking about this table and about how he might use it to serve God. And so he decided to have open house for lunch once a week. He prepared soup and home-made bread and put up posters in his window inviting people to come. Week after week he prepared, but no one came. As a society we are so wedded to the idea of not owing anyone anything, that people could not bring themselves to accept his hospitality, because then they would feel themselves in his debt. This is also why it has become difficult for churches

to distribute locally the produce brought in to celebrate the harvest. It was why also in Stow it was difficult to fulfil the terms of a bequest which said that the interest on a certain amount of money, invested long ago, had to be given to the poor of the parish each year. (Though there was one old woman who had no bones about taking it. Her mother had also received from this fund and she thought of it as money towards her coal. Which was very sensible of her.)

The problem with us trying to show that we are taking Jesus' command seriously, is that many people do not want to be thought of as the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. You wouldn't want that sort of label yourself. Not in this world. And that is why it is hard for the church to reach out to those around us who most need to hear the good news of God's love for them. It is because people see us – perhaps we see ourselves - as those who are at the top of the table, those who are together, who have life sorted. And those who know that they do not have life sorted, and who cannot hide that fact, think that they do not belong.

But in God's world, all of us are the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. We, gathered here today, are those who can never repay what is given, not loaned, to us. We are those who cannot hew cisterns for ourselves that will give us living water to satisfy our needs and in-built desires. We are those who do not deserve the seats of honour at the head of the table, nor perhaps even to be at that table at all. But God gives a party, he gives us an invitation, he brings us in and he makes us his honoured guests, not because of any worth of our own, but because of his worth, because of his love, because of his care. God, you see, is not proud. He showed that when he became one of us, not to berate us, but so that he could raise us up. God does not think about himself – he does not need to. God is secure as the one and only God, and this is such a given that it needs no thought from him. And so God thinks of us, of his creation, of those made in his image. And lame and blind and damaged and yes, self-centeredly proud as we are, he invites us in.

Knowing this, surely we are the last people who should be proud, the last people who should think of ourselves, of how others regard us, of whether or not our unique talents have the admiration that we think they deserve. We should be the last people to let those around us think, even by accident, that we have the love of God through any goodness or self-sufficiency of our own. We should be those who show that we are children of God by the way that we lose ourselves in service of others, in caring and praying, in encouraging and inviting, in lifting up and reaching out.

If we had gone on with our readings from Hebrews we would have found that the so what of the whole wonderful letter comes down to showing hospitality, to remembering those in prison or those persecuted for their faith as though we too were imprisoned or tortured. To be so involved with those who need us that it is as though their burdens are our own. Then we will not be stooping to broken cisterns, but we will find that we are drinking at the streams of living water which God has always given to his children. Amen.