

## Luke 14

I wonder how many cast their minds all the way back to 1997. Those living in Britain at the time may remember that the Labour Party began 13 years of government – and at the outset, they listed their priorities as “Education, Education – and what was the third thing?” So, after 13 years what do we think has been achieved?

In the mid 90s, about 7 percent of A level students achieved three grade A, A levels. This year, that figure has risen to over 17 percent! Which then means, of course, that we are back into the annual debate about whether people are getting more intelligent, or whether A levels are getting easier. However, there is a much clearer political measure of all this – and it has to do with access to universities.

With labour – the working man’s party - having been in power for such a long time, we would expect access to Britain’s top universities – to have been widened. And the fact is, that the opposite is the case. In the mid 90s, if you came from a wealthy background, you were six times more likely to attend a high ranking university than if you were from a poorer background. Today, you are seven times more likely to access a top university. Whilst on the surface, it appears that the labour government wanted to open up the gates and be more inclusive, in reality, our top universities become more exclusive.

Today’s reading from Luke, is a reading about who is in and who is out - of the kingdom of God. The scene is a huge feast – where the table would be set up into a U shape, with two wings of table space. The host would sit at the very centre – the more honoured the guest, the closer they would sit to the host. The more humble the guest, the further out they would sit. And the parable is usually taken as timeless moral advice for good, English modesty and humility:

When you pitch up at one of these meals – don’t go and park yourself in an honoured place, as though you’re the important one! That way – you may be humiliated into giving up your seat. No – much better to sit yourself in the most humble seat – that way, when the host sees your humility, he’ll tell you to come up here – and everyone will see how important you are! And hey presto – a good piece of practical wisdom about public etiquette! But is that it? Do we honestly think that Jesus came to tell us how to be English? Do we honestly think that Luke would have wasted space in his gospel recording the most radical, subversive, extreme figure in human history teaching people how to behave politely!

There is no better way to turn the Gospel into its exact opposite than this patronising interpretation that leaves us confirmed and strengthened in all we hold dear, and does absolutely nothing to challenge the enormous injustices of Jesus’ day and of our own.

The current injustices of our education system are a window into what Jesus was really getting at – and a means of understanding who we in relation to all that Jesus came to do and teach: The driving question for Jesus was, who is in and who is out! The privileged members of the religious community, those with an unblemished history, those from wealthy families, those whom God has blessed with success and reputation and status. And Jesus says – no, you privileged lot, when you’re invited to a banquet – sit yourselves with the poorest, the rejects, the marginalised. And when you hold a banquet – invite those marginalised people first – these are your neighbours. Because – that is how it will be at the great Banquet in

God's Kingdom: Jesus is redefining what it means to be the people of God... This is not just a set of rules for a dinner party.

And the whole education system we have at the moment, runs far deeper than simply learning how to pass exams – Education was a priority for the labour government – because they understood, rightly, that education gets to the heart of who we are as people. In essence, education means liberation.

On the surface, of course, we want everyone to have access to a good education. Now, at present, about 7 percent of the population have been education in private, fee-paying schools – and yet, those 7 percent dominate every economic sector except those - such as sport and hard science - in which only raw ability counts.

Through networking, confidence, unpaid internships, and above all, attendance at the top universities, these people run the media, politics, the civil service, the arts, the City, law, medicine, big business, the armed forces, even, in many cases, the protest movements challenging these powers. The Milburn report, published last year, shows that 45% of top civil servants, 53% of top journalists, 32% of MPs, 70% of finance directors and 75% of judges come from the 7% of the population who went to private schools.

We could play the statistics game with A level results, but the fact is, that – even if grades were all there was to go on, people with top grades, from poorer backgrounds – still do not apply to the likes of Oxford and Cambridge, partly because their schools don't encourage them to, partly because they feel these privileged quadrangles are not for the likes of them.

On the other hand, private schools groom their students for Oxford and Cambridge. One journalist wrote that “they pass from the quadrangles of Eton to the quadrangles of Oxford with a sense of entitlement. (Many of them spend the rest of their lives nannied in quadrangles, at the Bar and the Palace of Westminster. They then instruct everyone else to stand on their own two feet). »

So what is to be done? It's not for want of trying – Universities have spent tens of millions on outreach programmes, bursaries, scholarships, models of good practice... A report published this year documents how all this has failed – and then, bizarrely, goes on to recommend that we carry on with even more of it! The same old, problem solution mentality.

And yet – here is where it begins to shed light on the gospel and vice versa. Tweaking a system that is doomed to failure – is no substitute for a radical transformation of that system. If education is truly for everyone – then a proposal made over ten years ago is at least worth a try:

Oxford and Cambridge, one journalist suggested, should offer places to the top one or two pupils from every school, regardless of grades. The next-best universities would offer places to the pupils who come third and fourth, and so on downwards. There would be some adjustment for the size of the school, but the brutal logic holds.

It's brilliant when you pause to think about it properly. The system wouldn't be perfectly fair, because of the advantages privileged children enjoy from the beginning, but it would be a lot fairer than the current arrangement.

Instead of scrambling to get their children into the best state schools, pushy parents would seek to enrol them in the worst. In report after report, the overwhelming reason why some schools fail is that “the bright middle-class children are being siphoned off into the best schools. The system fails because it is segregated.” Not if only the top students from each school were offered places at top universities.

Private schools would collapse overnight: the last place you’d want to put your child is where other ambitious parents have sent theirs. The top universities would no longer be enclaves of the privileged: working class children would feel that they have just as much right to be there as the most privileged. The middle class flight to good catchment areas would screech into reverse as wealthy families extract themselves from their comfortable ghettos.

What a difference it would make. Just like with Jesus’ dinner party rules, students at top universities would be sat alongside those from different social backgrounds. And it was suggested ten years ago. And it has been suggested again this year. And what do you think is the response? Silence. Why? Probably because it would work – and the last thing we want is for the ruling classes to be in revolt!

It is precisely the same issue that Jesus faced! A powerful minority restrict access to the kingdom of God, to the benefits meant to be poured out upon all. And here comes Jesus – with his teaching about a feast. Now, of course, it is possible to behave in a nice, modest, English way – if you’re one of the minority ruling English class, you are programmed to behave this way. But it is possible to behave politely and modestly at a dinner party, and still be a self-interested, power-broker with absolutely no willingness to change who you really are for the sake of justice.

Jesus turns round to a prominent Pharisee – telling him who to invite for dinner. You remember that eating with people, in first century Palestine, was to identify yourself with them at the deepest level. The Pharisee is not simply being encouraged to do his bit for society – to be nice to poor people and make sure they are properly respected. This meal is about the kingdom of God – every meal, is a foretaste of the banquet at the end of time – where no one goes hungry, where everyone is satisfied, where all people are blessed by God. Your place at the meal table, displays how important you are to God and therefore how important you are amongst the people of God.

Now, by telling the Pharisee who to invite, and telling the guests where to sit – Jesus is offering a different glimpse of who God is, what the kingdom of God is, and who the inhabitants of that kingdom are. He is not only giving them some instructions on holding a dinner party – he is giving a new vision of what it means to be human. That God cares not only about the privileged, but about the nobodies, about the rejects, about those people widely considered to have been cursed by God. And if God cares for these people, then these people have a share in the Kingdom of God, a place at the table, - an invitation to the feast – the blessings of God’s kingdom are for everyone, not simply for everyone like me!

A vision of humanity that requires a re-ordering of society – and of the Pharisee’s personal life – even more radical than the suggestion about changing our education system. But the Pharisees are, in many ways, the first century embodiment of New Labour. On the surface, they want fairness and justice. Unlike the Sadducees – Old School Tories of Southern Israel – the Pharisees are the people’s leaders. But even with such admirable ideals, the Pharisees like New Labour after them, for some reason are failing to deliver on their high-sounding ideals.

Groups set up to challenge privilege and bring justice for all, end up treasuring privilege denying justice.

But both Jesus' instruction and the Educational Proposals are ignored or rejected for the same reason. They require a re-ordering so deep that it hurts too much – they require sacrifice.

Now with the suggestion about our education system – we could, of course, be very sensible. Point out all the difficulties and potential problems – and there are problems, and I've only given the bare bones of the proposal here. ... But we can face the problems of implementing them, or use the potential problems as excuses for rejection. Argue how impractical it would be and though – a nice idea – the consequences would be far too wide-ranging and unpredictable for it to be wise. But I can't help wondering, that if that is our response – it is precisely the response that Jesus received!

On the surface of it, we can admire him, see he is well intentioned but perhaps naïve, patronise him by turning his radical teachings into timeless moral sayings and religious truths, instructions for polite behaviour and so on. In effect, rejecting him as roundly as the crowds who called for his crucifixion.

Perhaps it's time for us to be educated: that is, liberated, freed from the habits and the assumptions and the privileges and the prejudices and the hopes and dreams and ambitions that crowd in to close our eyes and our ears and our minds and our hearts to the Kingdom of God. Jesus came to educate us.