

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Introduction

Another Sabbath encounter – another controversy! Today we come to the final one of three meal scenes in Luke (see also 7: 36–50; 11: 37–54;) in which Jesus is entertained at the house of a pharisee. On each occasion he does something which provokes outrage or attracts condemnation and then follows this up with some pithy observations about human nature and some pertinent teaching about the nature of God and his Kingdom. In this instance we have a healing and associated commentary (omitted from today's reading) followed by two well-known meal-related stories. Jesus' words at each of these stages offer much food for thought on a range of things, including conflict (see for example [this reflection](#) from Cycle 1). The three units also share a particular underpinning dynamic – that of watchfulness: in each case – in different ways and for different reasons – someone, somewhere is watching, or watching out for, something or somebody. These different types of watchfulness also raise useful questions for us as we think about conflict.

Preparation: 'People watching' – both literally and indirectly via various media platforms – is a common human activity. Cast your mind back to an occasion in which you were people-watching in some way: what were you noticing/looking out for? What were your reactions to what you noticed? How aware were you of what you were doing or why you were doing it? What, if any, were the consequences?

Text

Luke 14: 1, 7–14

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable.

“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host;

and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place.

But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you.

For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid.

But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Comment

Today's Gospel reading is actually part of a larger thought unit (14: 1-35) made up of five components: vv1-6; 7-11; 12-14; 15-24; and 25-35. The first four are connected by their mealtime setting and the fifth is a further commentary by Jesus on the issues raised in these [1]. Whilst the latter two elements have parallels (albeit developed differently) in Matthew, Mark and the Gospel of Thomas, the first three – the ones we encounter today – are unique to Luke. Although the first of these is largely omitted from the set reading (presumably because it is another objection-type pronouncement story sparked by a sabbath healing such as we had last week), the inclusion of its opening verse (v.1) sets up an important theme which runs through the whole passage, surfacing in different ways at various points.

Luke tells us in this first verse that the pharisees were watching Jesus 'closely' – the Greek *parat re* indicates assiduous attention. There can be positive reasons for watching someone closely – the desire to learn for example – but here, although Luke does not spell it out, the implication is that their intent was not benign [2]. Earlier this year I went to see an exhibition entitled 'What are you looking for?' by painter Michael Cook and textile artist Michelle Holmes [3]. Based on questions posed by Jesus in the Gospels each painting was accompanied by a smaller textile piece which presented the associated question and together they invited the viewer to consider what the question meant to them. One of the questions was that which Jesus poses in Luke 6: 41 about splinters and logs. In this instance though, only the first part of the formula was given and I suddenly found myself being challenged by a very different question: 'why do I even *go looking* for the splinter in someone else's eye?' It was chastening to acknowledge that sometimes I actively choose to look/read/listen because I *want* to be irritated or annoyed, or have my prejudices about someone or something reinforced.

But Jesus is also watching – v.7 tells us that he 'noticed' how the guests were behaving. Here the Greek (*epech* – to hold towards) also indicates giving close attention – the old-fashioned 'taking heed' gives a better flavour of this perhaps than 'noticing'[4]. However in this instance, the intent is clearly very different. Jesus is not seeking to trap people, justify irritation or annoyance, or to reinforce prejudices or stereotypes. Instead he is using what he observes going on – and

therefore what will be recognised by those involved – as a way of offering an opening for reflection on, and review of, their behaviour and its underlying motivations. These comments, and the following parable are, among other things, a challenge to consider some of the unseen elements governing how people think and act – in this first instance the shame/honour system around which their society was ordered. And, although the term is not used of him directly, it is clear that the host in vv. 9 and 10 is also on the watch – but in this instance to make sure that the prevailing system is properly maintained and reinforced. Are we watching others with a view to hindering or helping them, or are we simply wanting to make sure the status quo is preserved?

In the final section, Jesus turns his attention more particularly to his host and addresses some further comments to them in which ‘watching’ is once again a core element. This time the underlying societal principle being challenged is that reciprocity dictates action, and the nature of the corresponding watching is thus somewhat different: indirectly he asks his host and fellow guests to consider who they ‘watch out’ for and why they do this. In the life world of Jesus and his hearers, social relationships were governed by the principle of reciprocity, and the relationship between benefactor and beneficiary was one of reciprocal obligation. The benefaction was regarded as a loan and thus repayment of some kind was expected; this in turn dictated to whom one might offer help: good deeds were done to those who had done good to you, or from whom you could reasonably expect good deeds in return [5]. However Jesus suggests that his listeners (then and now) should not be paying attention to people principally in order to weigh up their social utility. Instead they should be watching out for those who – far from being useful and ‘comfortable’ from a social perspective – can give nothing in return. Are we watching people to see if they can be useful to us, or are we watching to see if we can be useful to them?

References

[1] For more on the structure of Luke’s Gospel see Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2002) [2] W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (London: Oliphant, 1978), vol. IV. p.201.

[3] <http://www.hallowed-art.co.uk/exhibitions/>

[4] *Vine* vol. II. p.211; vol.III. p.43.

[5] *Talbert* p. 77

Response

Watching others is a ubiquitous element of human behaviour and one with deep evolutionary roots related to survival. But it is also one that takes many different forms and is employed in the service of a range of ends – some positive and others less so. This is equally the case in conflict situations – we watch and watch out – for others for a variety of reasons; and we may or may not be as aware of our actions and motivations as we might be. This episode from Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem raises various questions about how and why we watch and you are invited to

consider some of the following ones – perhaps with respect to your own practices of watching, a specific instance of watching or a conflict situation with which you are familiar.

Who is being watched and what is the motivation for doing so?

What expectations or hopes are there around potential outcomes – for the watcher, the watched, or the larger systemic context?

Does the watching feel a healthy or a helpful exercise for those knowingly or unknowingly involved? Why or why not?

If watching feels as though it is feeding negative attitudes, what steps can be taken to change the situation? Is there anyone who might be able to help with this?

Prayer

Jesus
You were watched
by those around you
for both good and bad reasons.

And, just like us,
you too were a watcher
looking at those around you –
anxious to enrich life
expand understanding
and extend the reach of God's Kingdom
even when your words seemed harsh.

May our watching
always be wholesome,
and its intent
healthy and helpful,
just as yours was.
Amen

Further Reading

For more information on the work of Michael Cook see <http://www.hallowed-art.co.uk>

and for Michelle Holmes see <https://www.archangelstudio.co.uk/michelle-holmes>

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Relationships