

A Place at the Table: Celebrating the First Woman Archbishop of Canterbury

Tatjana Ljujić

The two appointed Scripture readings for the BCP Holy Communion on Sunday, October 12th, speak powerfully into our life as a Church at this extraordinary time. A passage from the letter to the Ephesians (4.1-6) and Jesus' teaching at the Pharisee's table (Luke 14.1-11) point us towards humility, unity, and the overturning of human expectations by the grace of God. They do so in the week after history was made, when the first woman Archbishop of Canterbury was announced.

In Luke's Gospel we find Jesus at a Sabbath meal, under the watchful eyes of the law-keepers. A person with dropsy is there ('dropsy' being the archaic term for swelling in the body, indicative of overall ill health). Watching the ill man in the presence of Jesus, the Pharisees' unspoken test is simple: will Jesus heal (which, in their interpretation, would mean breaking the Sabbath law), or will he do nothing (as he — again, in their understanding of the Sabbath — is expected to do under Jewish law)?

But Christ's compassion cannot be constrained. He heals the man, and in doing so does something that can be read in two completely different ways, depending on your vantage point. He either breaks the sacred commandment to keep the Sabbath, or reveals the heart of God, who is more concerned with love than with rule-keeping.

The purpose of the Sabbath law was never really about prohibition; it was about liberty. The law was given in the context of God's great act of liberation in Exodus: after the Israelites had been freed from slavery in Egypt, Moses, led by God, aimed to establish a society where life is not consumed by ceaseless labour, as it was under the exploitative rule of the Pharaoh.

Whether you take the Exodus story to be history, or a myth, or perhaps mythologised history, it does not alter the meaning of the Sabbath law. The Sabbath is a gift, a reminder that God's people are called to order society around justice, mercy, and freedom, rather than obedience to an oppressive set of rules. Its purpose is to create space for the whole community — especially for those most vulnerable to exploitation — to live in dignity, and a space to remember that their God is a god of freedom, not of bondage. The Sabbath is meant to protect life, not to restrict the mercy of God.

And yet how often, in every age, do people of faith use the language of law or tradition to justify the withholding of compassion? The Pharisees in Luke's Gospel cling to their regulations in a way that denies God's purpose. (Again, whether this is a historically accurate portrayal of Pharisees — probably not! — is beside the point.) The point is about the mode of being religious that Pharisees in the Gospel stories have come to represent: namely, keeping the law at the expense of love. And how ironic that the Church, which is meant to be founded on the teaching that challenges the Pharisees' oppressive legalism, falls time and again into the temptation of loveless law-keeping: rules that exclude, conventions that limit, arguments that do not build up but instead hold back the gifts of God.

The struggle over women's leadership in the Church has been such a battleground. For centuries, appeals to tradition, backed by selective passages of Scripture, have been used to prevent women from fully living out their vocation. The gifts of God have been questioned, restricted, or refused. Yet Christ continues to heal, to call, and to send. Last week, with the announcement of the first woman Archbishop of Canterbury, we witnessed the fruit of that work of healing in our own time. What once seemed impossible, or at least remote, has become reality.

And so we come to the second part of the reading from Luke. Jesus, noticing how some guests at the Pharisee's table habitually choose seats of honour, calls them to take a lower position. Had it never occurred to them that the host could offer the seat, which they — or people like them — are so used to occupying, to someone else?

I would never presume to speak for Christ, but judging by the parable he told the guests at the Sabbath dinner in Luke's Gospel, it does not seem unfounded to believe that he rejoices that from among those once assumed not to have a place at the high table, a person has been called to lead his Church.

To me, as to many likeminded people, the calling of a woman as Archbishop is not a matter of worldly promotion, as though the Church is simply catching up with modern society. It is the Spirit of God reminding us that the table of Christ has room for all whom God calls, and that we ought not to set limits on God's gifts.

As heartened as many of us are by the news of the new Archbishop of Canterbury, let us not forget our siblings in Christ who are disheartened. I pray that we all, heartened and disheartened, may be guided by the passage reading from Ephesians, which encourages the Church to live in humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another in love and making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

The unity of the Church does not depend on everyone agreeing. It flows from Christ himself: 'There is one body and one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.'

The challenge before us is not to find some compromise that will keep everyone happy, but to live with humility and gentleness, to bear with one another in love, and to trust that God's Spirit is sufficient to hold us together. May God bless the new Archbishop of Canterbury, and may her flock rejoice in the widening of Christ's table. And may we all together, and in all things, seek to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Tatjana Ljujić was ordained deacon in the Church of England this July. She trained at Sarum College and is serving her title at Bristol Cathedral.