

What a strange few weeks it has been around here. This has been great but things have not quite happened in the order I had expected. Carpet, heating and cleaning – moving things out, only to move them back 24 hours later. At times it has all felt quite strange. And not unlike the writer to the letter to the Hebrews, I have felt that the faith part of our existence felt more and more on the margins of the activity within the building. But the joy of the rhythm of the day here is that regardless of what else is happening in this space, what building or repairs are going on, the bell rings 3 times a day to remind us to pray. And on a number of those times not only do we stop as individuals to prayer, but as a community we stop to pray.

Hebrews 13 can read like a list of rules -- do this and don't do that -- but it also includes some vital and enduring theological truths<sup>1</sup>, which I think might help us all when life feels a little overwhelming and the practical seems to overtake the spiritual. After the writer to the Hebrews warns the new community about covetousness and dissatisfaction, he reminds them that God has said, "I will never leave you nor will I forsake you." There is no need to worry about material goods if you have the presence and protection of God. This is a helpful reassurance as we continue to build our community life together.

One of the joys of our Christian community is that it is constantly moving and changing. While God remains constant and is always with us, we are changing as people, growing and learning more. But at times of course, particularly at times of change, this can mean we have to re-evaluate what defines us, and how our faith is expressed.

The Hebrews text gives us some good markers for how we might go about this. The first mark, which of course lays the foundation of all others to rest on is love. The writer reminds us that this love is in two directions – firstly love of fellow believers in community: "let mutual love continue" (13:1). We are family, and we must continue to nurture and strengthen that bond if we are to find our way<sup>2</sup>. But love also has an external dimension. As we show love to our brothers and sisters, we do not wall ourselves off as members of a closed or isolated community. We are also to show love to the stranger through the gift of hospitality (13:2). This links in with the second marker – which is to care for those who are in distress as well as those who are in need around us.

The writer then moves on to highlight the importance of fidelity and faithfulness in relationships; and then to contentment for the life in faith that we have. We also are defined by loyalty and constancy. We should remember those who have spoken the word of God to us, for their faithfulness stands as an example for us (13:7). Jesus is the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2946](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2946)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=658](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=658)

Finally of course the community is defined by the commitment it has to worship together, for it is in our worship that we express our love for God. Acceptable worship does not find expression solely in ritual acts in the assembly or sanctuary. It infuses all of life. Therefore, in our love for each other or for strangers or in our care for those in crisis, we are worshipping God. In our sharing that reflects our trust in God rather than possessions, we are worshipping God. In our faithfulness to our covenants and to the example of those who have gone before us, we are worshipping God.<sup>3</sup>

As we so often reflect on when we meet together, our worship is not just this hour together now, rather it is the purpose and expression of our lives – even when they feel tough or distracting. Our life too is part of God’s work; not because we respond out of guilt or coercion, but because it sustains, empowers and enriches our lives.

In essence this is the message that is being outlined in our gospel reading too – the parable or maybe even good practice which Jesus shares as he is invited to eat the Sabbath meal with one of the leaders of the Pharisees. At this point in Jesus ministry he is causing quite a stir – the religious and political leaders are already nervous about the following Jesus has, the influence on community thought and behaviour. Of course their primary fear is that his power will usurp their own, and so we have the lovely phrase at the beginning of today’s reading ‘*they were watching him closely*’ (v1).

And so, as they are watching Jesus, he is also watching them; and he notices what he has so often noticed before (and I suspect many of us might notice when we attend a public gathering) - Jesus notices the guests at the Pharisee’s house choosing “places,” and so Jesus tells his hearers a parable (Luke 14:7). Unlike many of the parables in Luke this one is not particularly complicated and does not seem to take much unpacking – in fact I suspect nearly all the hearers, including ourselves would get the point of the story as soon as we hear it. “*For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*”

Now at one level this story is about hospitality and table manners – but like the Hebrews message it is also talking about the long game – Jesus is looking at this, as God views it all, within the arc of the divine long-term perspective of eschatology, which includes divine judgment, too. Imagine that: what starts off secular becomes a revealing place of God’s purposes “in, with, and under!”<sup>4</sup>

That is, how does our life too express part of God’s work; so that what sustains, empowers and enriches our lives – but also enriches the kingdom of God and those around us. The interconnectedness of the long game.

On Friday afternoon and evening I was able to go for a second time to Warner Brother’s studios to see the Making of Harry Potter exhibit. It is such a fantastic

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=658](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=658)

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2957](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2957)

experience, and something I highly recommend. I went this time with my sister, with whom in the past I have lined up to buy Harry Potter Books as they have been released at midnight, and watched most of the movies. We are both fans and so it was a wonderful evening.

One of the spectacular things about this exhibition is the scale of it. 100's and 100's of props and artefacts all hand-made or collected from antique shops. So much of what I had assumed would have been done digitally was actually made by hand. But the reason that the exhibit is so vast is that when they started making the first movie, only 3 of the books had been published and they knew there were more to come. They needed to prepare for the long-game and plan to keep everything they made in case it appeared again in a later movie.

There are some bits however where this didn't quite work – for example the set of the boys dormitory, they made the beds suitable for the length of 11-year-old boys – by the time they filmed the final scenes in these the boys were 17-18 and had to curl up so that they could get the shots.

Now as you know, I could quite happily talk about Harry Potter, and even its theological connections at any point, but the reason for mentioning it this morning is because of this notion of the 'long-game' and not knowing when we build or undertake something now when it will be used later, or sustains or support us for something that will take place in the future.

Both the writer to the Hebrews and Luke's account of Jesus banquet parable are addressing this same theme. Our faith is forever – it is the long game. We don't necessarily know the journey we will take as a congregation or as an individual. We know it will involve God and we pray that we will continue to grow in faith. We are given tools to work with love, perseverance, community, worship and wisdom. We are reminded that in the end all that we do is for the glory of God and therefore we work to build up God's community and Kingdom in all that we do. What we build today and learn today needs to sustain us not just for today; but be a resource to sustain in the years ahead.

Scripture gives us many resources, like the list we hear today, of gifts that will help us on our way. But we are reminded in the words of Jesus that it is not just for today, but for the future also. The ordinary things today bring us to something extraordinary tomorrow.

So regardless of how our week flows let us remember that we do it all - as an offering of praise and worship to God. Amen.