

Welcome to Love Island, or perhaps Big Brother- for The Gospel reading today is, surely, a first century version of these TV shows, in which everything Jesus says and does is under the microscope. This dinner party which we hear about wasn't just an act of friendly neighbourliness- it was deliberate, a set-up, elephant trap at the ready, so that this pain-in-the -proverbial teacher, a status-lacking itinerant preacher from the back of beyond, could be critically watched, assessed and framed by those who considered themselves rather more suave, in the loop, socially ascendant Jerusalemites, with all their fantasies and prejudices.

They know it, he knows it.

But Jesus doesn't play the cool dude, doesn't woo his audience, doesn't try to worm his way in to others' good books. No. Rather, Jesus goes on the offensive, and somehow, by doing so, turns the attention from himself onto them. In the Gospel record of this event, it is the host and the other guests at the dinner party who become the

watched, the event, not this Jesus, as the host had intended.

So Jesus watches as the guests jostle for position, and makes a common sense sideswipe at human nature, about our desire for status. The guests, seeking out like-minded or like-resourced individuals, friends and colleagues, while ignoring others, are reflecting their self-imposed stratification of their own worlds. Jesus watches and then speaks- not that he is commending any particular social order, but rather asking people to think honestly about themselves- lest, woe upon woe, the host needs to intervene at the cost of huge personal embarrassment. The host- in Jesus mind, determines who sits where, and which of us hasn't had a moment of dread at a wedding or a formal dinner to see our name card placed next to Mr or Mrs extremely Boring? But ours is not to choose- it is the host's responsibility to place people

at dinner. And in this simile, the host is, of course, God.

And as if that weren't enough from this singularly bad-mannered guest, Jesus compounds his rudeness by going a step further in the observational stakes. Having made the clear assumption that God is the host- and, pushing the simile further he suggests that God will invite whomsoever he wishes. As we heard in the OT reading, in God's economy, the downtrodden are raised up, the powerful thrust out of their thrones, the humble poor exalted, the mighty fallen. So if you really do want an invitation to the heavenly banquet, it may well be with strangers on eitherside, not knowing, as Hebrews says, if you are thereby entertaining angels. God's desire is for the flourishing of the mutuality of love – given and received, shared and increased in that sharing. So the question becomes, not so much how do I manage to get an invitation, but how do I ensure that everyone is invited. As another has said, the takeaway from this passage is, 'How do I learn that

including everyone in the invitation, does not devalue my own invitation', how do I live that in my daily life- perhaps particularly as we approach a winter of trepidation and fear as millions are pushed into food and energy poverty in our own city and country. How are we going to ensure that all are invited to the feast of God's love- for the banquet is about God's generosity, not our merit.

And of course, I'd have been, I am, one of those critical, cynical dinner guests, who would have been convinced of my own social status and Jesus' affrontery. But I thank God that I have access to the insight of not only this Gospel and sacred scripture, but of the Godly learning and originality of George Herbert, priest and poet, who wrote

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back

Guilty of dust and sin.

But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack

From my first entrance in,

Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,

If I lacked any thing.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

And I learn again, that the banquet is of God's
generosity, not my merit, and therefore if for me
then for all. But how am I, how are we as the
christian community in Chelsea going to live that
realisation, not in fantasy TV worlds, but here in
Chelsea this coming cold winter?

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