

SERMON FOR TRINITY 18 | 15.10.2017

While it is a minor miracle that, today, you can travel from the fairly remote village of Esentepe on the coast of Northern Cyprus to Islington in nine hours, there is a bit of me which isn't quite sure where I am! Setting up and clearing away after the excellent Youth Prom yesterday (altogether a six hour shift) didn't help. So if I seem a bit more incoherent than usual, please forgive me!

So what is my lasting memory of our week away: Bellapais Abbey, the beautifully unspoilt Karpas peninsula or the stunning ancient citadel at St Hilarion? No, the greatest pleasure was having time to read – on this occasion W Somerset Maughan's 'Of Human Bondage'. You can tell how long it had been on my shelves; the cover price was 50p. New!

The story is of a young man born to feckless parents and brought up by his constantly disapproving uncle, a rather self-indulgent North Devon Vicar and his downtrodden wife, at some time before the Boer War. It is a story about growing up and the reader is taken from Devon to London, to Heidelberg and to Paris and back again. The 600 closely printed pages contain beautifully illustrated vignettes of his relationships with – a German boarding house keeper, any number of artist friends in Paris, a Sloane Square widow and a manipulative single mother whom he falls deeply in love with before he realises she is only using him. Finally Philip is helped by a family who give him a bed for the night when all his money has run out and whose older daughter eventually agrees to marry him – almost on the last page!

One of the many ways of getting involved in reviewing our relationship with God is not dissimilar to Somerset Maughan's technique. It involves drawing a time line, noting down the major events of our lives - births, major events, people we have met – and then recording the effect that each has on us. In the celebrations, who rejoiced with us? In the down days, who was there to stand by us and to help us through?

When I try to do this, I find that one of the most fruitful questions to ask (as Philip Carey does throughout 'Of Human Bondage') is: do I always mix with the same kinds of people. Am I mostly drawn to one kind of person – and if so, why?

Philip's answer is that, generally, he is attracted to people who flatter him a bit and make him feel wanted: given his start in life that is hardly surprising. And if you asked yourself the same question, what would be your answer? Who are the people that you relate to best?

Jesus' great parable in today's Gospel (St Matthew 22) is ostensibly about a wedding feast. Lots of people have been sent 'Keep the date' messages and finally the day has come and the tables are set. This is a big event – as all wedding tend to be - so there is more than a bit of anger on the part of the King when the people on the guest list send in lame excuses explaining why they cannot come.

The reasons are irrelevant: this was a tight knit group who probably knew each other beforehand so they knew what kind of occasion it would be. Like so many of Jesus' parables, his aim is to point up the hard-heartedness of the Jewish leadership and it is their refusal to mix with others which is Jesus' target here.

So when the guest list has shrunk to nothing, the food is all prepared and all the tables are empty, what is to be done? The answer is that the tight-knit group who were on the original invitation list have been replaced by a 'come one, come all' invitation. Not even 'bring a bottle': just come.

Now in that scenario there is no knowing who will show up. You won't know whether you are sitting next to a High Court judge, a taxi driver, or someone from the street community.

In the novel, Philip moves from one environment to another – often very uncomfortably. But you can see him learning from every encounter – albeit, as the reader, with some impatience at times. Won't you ever learn...?! He finds the experience of mixing hard, but he forces himself to do it.

At the wedding feast the 'social mix' is all there in one place at one time. And Jesus seems to be saying: if the exclusive Israel won't respond to my invitation then let's open the doors of God's love to the whole world. But beware: you could find yourself sitting next to anybody.

For the wedding feast write the Church!

On the Sunday of our holiday we were invited to the local Anglican Church by a good friend of ours who spends a couple of months each year, playing the organ. The tiny Church was packed with over 120 people – a mix of expats who were regulars, expats who came occasionally and visitors like ourselves.

And what was clear – from the sermon and from other conversations, was how difficult the Chaplain was finding it to keep these three groups in some semblance of a Christian community. The regulars blamed the irregulars for not paying enough to keep the Church solvent; the irregulars blamed the core regulars for trying to rule the place and both of them blamed a few odd balls who spent their retirement writing to the bishop accusing the chaplain of preaching heresy!

I won't go on; the point is made. Jesus' invitation is always to say *'This is my invitation'*. The picture in Isaiah of a wonderfully lavish banquet on the mountain for my people still pertains. And the invitation is for all.

So why does Jesus add a second theme in today's Gospel: about the person who doesn't come properly dressed? Again the picture about someone's choice of wedding clothes isn't necessarily helpful if we take it literally: in 1st century Palestine people would simply have gone home to change into whatever their 'best' was.

The point that Jesus is making is that this one person refused to 'change'. Not clothes but their mind set. They wanted to come to a feast where everyone would be like them. It was the cry of some in that ex-pat Church. Why can't everyone here be ... like me?!

It would be so easy to take this Gospel story and see there a rather stern God who excludes a person because they are not dressed for the part. Or someone not deemed to be sufficiently 'good'. Actually it is not about God with-holding anything. The choice about whether to accept our fellow travellers, or fellow guests, lies entirely with us.

At 10am we have yet another Baptism. The Church will be full of people who are not familiar with St James' - and there will be lots of them! I know there will be some murmurings from a few of our regulars as a result.

Yet at the heart of today is Louise Ahmet who came to St James' because her mother had died at the age of 48. That was back in 2011. Since then she has been, with her sister Lisa, baptised and confirmed and they were both on the flower rota and readers rota for a time. Lisa's two boys have been baptised and now Benjamin has arrived and he takes his place here too this morning.

And as part of that Mass Louise wants to read a poem she has written - to express just what a journey she has been on, a poem that recalls some of the people who have accepted her and her family here.

Who is to know who will be there in the congregation – at the great wedding feast? The answer is that there will be all sorts of people – people whom God has drawn here today.

And yet - are we able to say, truthfully and with our hands on our hearts: you are all welcome? I do hope so.

Because unless we genuinely welcome our guests, how can we ever expect to grow – and learn – and change?