St Mary's Church, Dorchester, Sunday 31st August 2025 i.e. 11th Sunday after Trinity. Today was one of our quarterly healing services.

Ecclesiasticus 10:12-18
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
Luke 14:1, 7-14

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I go into hospital I have a list of things I always take with me. I take my lanyard and my diary. Because I usually eat there on my hospital days, I take a packed lunch. I also like to take a book. I choose books that I hope other people will find interesting; maybe if they see me in the hospital restaurant they might want to stop and talk. For the last two weeks I've been going in with this book: it's called "Dementia: Living in the Memories of God". The author is John Swinton; he's a practical theologian. In this book he's talking about how we can preserve the human dignity of disabled people, especially those with dementia. It's a prize-winning piece of contemporary theology; it's pretty good.

Swinton says there's a problem with the way we talk about personhood today. When we say who counts as a person we always seem to end up excluding people. For example, a popular idea is that you can define personhood by capacity – especially the capacity to remember. Accountants and politicians find it useful to talk in that way, but it automatically excludes many human beings who we would normally want to include, especially the very young and the very old. Some philosophers are happy to bite that bullet; but it makes many people justifiably squeamish, and even the philosophers act in ways that show they don't really believe the ideas they publish. [The example cited by Swinton is Peter Singer.] Some popular definitions of personhood also lead us to counter-intuitive conclusions. We end up saying, for example, that individuals can start off life as non-persons, become persons for a couple of decades, and then stop being persons again. I suspect many of us will find that strange: surely being a person isn't something that starts and stops – it's just who you are.

So the author of my book says we need to look at personhood differently. Part of his argument is that we should put the experience of disabled people at the front of our talk about personhood, rather than somewhere in the background. Swinton says that far from being anomalies, disabled people embody things that are true of all of us all the time. So he says, for example, that being a person means being dependent on others; it means that you have a beginning and an end; it means

being aware of your bodily needs and your limitations; and so on. The more we reflect on these characteristics, the more we see that they are true for all of us all of the time; it's just that we see them most clearly when we consider people with disabilities. Disabled people show us who we are.

It's possible for Swinton to talk about persons in the way he does because he's a Christian, because he has read the Bible and understood it. Viewed in the light of our relationship with God human beings are all dependent and vulnerable; we are all defined first by the gift we have already received, and only second by the gift we can give others. So Christianity has something very important to say to a culture like ours, which prizes individual autonomy. Autonomy is the myth that we can create and re-create ourselves. The myth of Autonomy says that those points in human life where we need other people are embarrassing exceptions, and not the rule. If we prize autonomy too much, we may end up saying that only some human beings deserve our love. Christianity cannot be made compatible with the myth of individual autonomy. Christianity will always be at least an irritant – if not a scandal – in a society that insists on that picture of human personhood.

I've gone into that detail about my book because it seems to me that the valuable work of people like John Swinton is doing the same job in our culture that Jesus did in his own. Jesus, after all, is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith [Hebrews 12:2], and we are called to be like him. Our Gospel today gives us a picture of Jesus in conversation with people who are clearly deeply in love with their own autonomy – symbolised by the control that they exercise at their dinner tables. Swinton is Christ-like in the way he tries to turn our self-image on its head.

Imagine, Jesus says, that you are not the important person you think you are. You may come to a wedding feast and take a place of honour, because you think it's your due. But imagine that as soon as you sit down a more important person arrives and you have to give them your place of honour. Again, imagine throwing a dinner party where the guests are not the people who will benefit you – the people who will reward your gift with a gift of their own, in a closed circle of self-enrichment. Imagine instead that you want your gift to actually be a gift. So – as if in a dream – instead of inviting a circle of people who can give you what you want, you invite a group of people who – by most people's reckoning – cannot give you anything at all: “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind”. And by giving – actually giving – to these people, you receive the greatest gift imaginable.

Parables like these ones threaten to change our world. If we hear and understand these parables, we will expect that other people will be more important than us; and we will calculate the balance of

social value and reward differently. Jesus is pointing us to a different world: a world where a person's value is calculated not according to what they can give, but according to their need, and where all are welcome, especially those who are considered different.

*

You may not have noticed unless you were following the readings in your Bible, but there's one of those strange holes in our Gospel reading today. We heard that Jesus arrives at the house of this Pharisee for a meal on the Sabbath. What we did not hear this morning is that as soon as he sits down a man with dropsy appears in front of him. Dropsy is an old word for oedema, or fluid retention – the man is probably swollen and uncomfortable. And Jesus does his usual thing – he heals him. Why was this healing story missing today? Well, I notice that the readings set for last week [i.e. the tenth Sunday after Trinity, Proper 16] also had Jesus healing someone on the Sabbath [Luke 13:10-17]. Luke thought it was worth putting these two stories close to each other so they can inform each other; the people who choose our Bible readings had other ideas. In any case we didn't get that healing story last week [i.e. because of the Feast of St Bartholomew], and we didn't get a healing story today either.

John Swinton says that disabled people show us what it means to be a person. That has lots of implications; one of them is to do with healing. In our deeply flawed culture, compassion seems like such a limited resource. It's understandable that we will see sickness and disability as risks – we'll try to do what we can to eliminate them; and that's what love will look like a lot of the time.

But I wonder: suppose our world was different? Suppose we lived in a world where those who were sick and disabled were not treated as strange and unwelcome. Suppose we lived in a world like the second parable Jesus told this morning, where “the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind” were invited first. They come first because they are *more than useful* to us, they show us who we are.

If we lived in that world, what would healing look like? There would be some constants, I'm sure: nobody wants to be in pain; nobody likes losing joy or skill or freedom. There would still be plenty of work for doctors, nurses and carers. But there would also be differences. There are lots of people living today whom modern Western society casually disables. Given the choice, our society would just as casually select them out of existence. I'm thinking about conditions like Down Syndrome and Autism: disabilities which are not necessarily a barrier to a fulfilled human life. In the world Jesus describes, we might not feel the need to heal these people.

So what in our culture really needs healing? And what doesn't?