

The Reverend Geoffrey Howard

Matthew 9.9-13

Some of you will remember the 1967 film, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* Its theme was interracial marriage, which in some American states at that time was as illegal as it was in South Africa. Joanna, daughter of upper-class liberal parents, brings home for dinner her new fiancé, a successful black physician, together with his parents. Each set of parents has reservations and there is both drama and comedy as the story is brought to a happy conclusion. It is a dinner party they will remember for the rest of their lives.

I felt like giving this title to a meal I shared a couple of years ago with an old friend.

Peter, not his real name, is an Anglican priest who no longer serves in the ministry. We became friends in the early eighties when he was a young ordinand at Ridley Hall, he is a conservative, evangelical, charismatic, who speaks in tongues. He became the vicar of the leading charismatic church in his far-away diocese and had a successful – if that is the right word – ministry there. We do not share the same churchmanship.

Most of his life he has nursed a secret, one he has shared with only a few counsellors and close friends. He is a transvestite, or, as he prefers to be called, a cross-dresser. This has been a source of great anguish to him and he has sought all kinds of help to break this besetting urge – counselling; Ignatian spirituality; at the time when the Toronto Blessing was in great vogue among charismatics he and his wife made several visits to Toronto seeking a deliverance this blessing promised to give, he also sought help at the Anglican evangelical stronghold Holy Trinity, Brompton. All in vain.

A couple of years ago he made the courageous decision to come out of the closet, and being the person he is he didn't use half measures. He came out not with a whimper but with a bang. I think *spectacular* is the correct description. He spent a small fortune on glamorous clothes and for a month or so he lived openly as a transvestite in his smallish cathedral city. He is not a charismatic for nothing. It was a liberating experience for him and it exorcised the demons of shame which had haunted him for decades. The response of the vicar of the charismatic church he and his wife attended was to immediately excommunicate him, there he is no longer allowed to share in the bread and wine of the Lord's table – an illegal action supported by the church wardens and the congregation.

Despite our differing approaches to the faith, whenever he has needed someone with whom to talk over a problem, whether personal or to do with his ministry, he has tended to turn to me. So it was not unexpected that at the height of this drama Peter decided to pay me a visit. I looked forward to seeing him but with some misgivings. What if he should arrive in the small, tight-knit community where I live in his full regalia? What if, similarly dressed, he wanted to go shopping in town and asked me to go with him? I felt something like the liberal parents of the girl in the film at the prospect of Peter coming to dinner - and in his case bed and breakfast as well.

To my relief he arrived normally dressed, but once inside changed into his preferred gear. I spent the rest of the evening dreading one of my neighbours popping in to see me. Should I introduce him as *Peter* and wait for the gasp of astonishment or as *Petra* and hope they don't notice? By the time Peter departed, still leaving my respectability intact, I felt that although outwardly I had behaved with

impeccable liberalism, inwardly I wasn't much better than the vicar who had excommunicated him. Peter's visit confronted me with the question, *Did Jesus ever worry about who he dined with?*

I decided that unlike me he wouldn't have turned a hair at my friend's arrival. And one of the reasons for this conclusion is that today we remember St Matthew.

As you will have been told many times, he was a tax-gatherer. Tax-gatherers today, despite being about as popular as traffic wardens or bankers, are in our more rational moments regarded as necessary civil servants and if anything there should be more of them. Not so in Matthew's day. The Roman Inland Revenue was strictly privatised - indeed the way the wind is blowing so might our own be one day. The collection of taxes was farmed out to the highest bidder who bought a franchise over a specific area. He was not a paid civil servant but was expected to use his private enterprise to squeeze not only what was legal from his clients but also as much extra as he could to line his own pocket with. It was a bit like giving the Mafia carte blanche to collect the local rates. With a great deal of justification tax collectors were not loved.

There was also another dimension which fuelled the hatred of patriotic Jews. The tax collector was himself a Jew, one who had sold his soul and his nation to its oppressor. Matthew belonged to a profession of swindlers and traitors. It was as true in those days as it is in ours that you are known by the company you keep and to associate with such riff-raff was to bring upon your head the contempt of decent people.

Yet the very same evening that Matthew left the receipt of customs to follow Jesus he gave a dinner for his old mates, his reviled partners in crime, at which Jesus was the guest of honour. *Guess who's going to that dinner?* must have been on the lips of everyone in Jerusalem that evening.

If Jesus could dine publicly with people like that he would have little difficulty sharing some bread and wine with my friend Peter.

Christians, indeed all religious people, can be roughly divided into one of two categories, the exclusive or the inclusive. There are Christians who sincerely believe they are to avoid contact as far as possible with the non-religious, or for that matter, even more with their fellow believers who differ from them. It was in such a context that I began my own Christian pilgrimage. *Come out from among them and be ye separate* was the watchword of the Holiness Church within which I had a dramatic conversion. Although there were many good people among them, holiness seemed to be defined more by what you didn't do than by what you did do. Alcohol, smoking, the theatre, the cinema, dancing, gambling - even buying a raffle ticket was frowned on - I could go on. I became a stranger to my old friends, my workmates, my family. It seems to me looking back that such a faith was designed to cut you off from the rest of the human race.

It lasted eight years – and then I left the faith altogether for several years. I returned at a crisis in my life, but this time to an inclusive faith, one, I believe, informed more by the gospels and the example of Jesus than by many other parts of the Bible.

We all need boundaries. We all have our comfort zone. But this morning I want us to look afresh at those boundaries and in the light of Matthew and his dinner party to ask ourselves, *Who would I be embarrassed, ashamed, scandalised to be seen eating with?* And, especially, *Who would I not feel happy sharing the Lord's table with?* And, *Would Jesus sympathise with me or with the ones I exclude?*