

The Revd Lindsay Meader

## Table Manners

If I were to ask you what's special about today I'm sure there would be a number of different answers. Many of you will hopefully know today is Sacred Earth Day. It's the 6<sup>th</sup> month anniversary of the Paris Climate Change Summit and a day on which to reaffirm our commitment to caring for the earth and working together to ensure that cutting emissions will prevent well over 100 million people from losing their homes due to droughts, floods, sea level rise and devastating storms. Today is the closest Sunday to the Baltic Day of Mourning and once again, this afternoon this church will host the annual remembrance service for people from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. And tonight is the second anniversary of Soul Sanctuary Gospel Choir singing at our monthly Sunday evening Eucharist! But most prominent of all, especially here in the UK, today is the third and final day of official celebrations for HM The Queen's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, with the Patron's Lunch taking place barely half a mile from here. And so today, I want to think about . . . table manners.

On Monday I was invited to say grace at the Annual Dinner at Royal Academy of Arts. I have to admit to being a little daunted by the grandeur of the gold embossed invitation and the discreet italicised wording in the bottom corner indicating "White ties and decorations preferred." Thankfully a white dog collar circumnavigates the need for a posh frock or little black dress but I was nonetheless a little overawed and somewhat apprehensive that I would be a complete fish out of water and find myself sitting at dinner, uncertain of which knife and fork to use and, more uncomfortably still - knowing that my role there would mean I was seated at the very end of the top table - would spend the entire meal stuck between two strangers whose conversation would be dry, erudite and when it comes to the art scene, (of which I know very little), way above my head.

Thankfully my fears were unfounded. It was a very pleasant evening, the food was delicious and best of all, the man on one side of me, with whom I happily conversed for most of the meal, was not an art buff but rather the personal protection officer of a VIP guest. So we had a relaxed and wide ranging conversation that ranged from security training through travel, music, the Bruce Springsteen gig at Wembley the night before, theatre and some of the more unusual situations we'd both found ourselves in through our work. He dabbled in watercolours but reassuringly, was as mystified as I was by some of the works hanging on the walls around us.

Table manners can lead to all sorts of anxiety. Getting it wrong is a clear way of identifying yourself as an outsider; someone who perhaps doesn't belong. In such situations where there is a clear etiquette, where people are expected to conform to particular codes of behaviour, no one wants to stand out by getting it wrong. As you expect, there were a good number of outlandishly dressed guests at the RA Dinner. Grayson Perry wasn't the only male artist to circumnavigate the 'white ties' specification by coming in a frock but neither he nor his fellow cross-dressers nor any of the other more flamboyant characters drew any attention to themselves throughout the meal. Their table manners were every bit those one would expect from hosting academicians and their guests.

On Friday morning I switched on the radio and found myself immersed in one of those stories that stop you in your tracks and bring you to the brink of tears. It was the story of a man who was invited to a fine dinner. At the time, he was in pieces, suffering with acute Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He found himself seated next to the host. When she turned to engage him in conversation, he found himself unable to speak.

Her compassion and empathy – in the midst of such a formal occasion – was deeply, profoundly humane, highly original, non-conformist and second to none. The guest was top vascular surgeon David Nott, who since 1993 has spent several weeks every year taking unpaid leave from the NHS to go and work in conflict zones around the world for Médecins Sans Frontières and the Red Cross. During the last 23 years he's volunteered in war zones such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Chad, Haiti and Syria, encountering first-hand the worst cruelty of which humankind is capable. The host, as you will know if you also heard *Desert Island Discs*, was Her Majesty the Queen.

During the programme there were several points at which Nott was overcome with emotion and unable to continue speaking. He did manage, however, to tell how he was awarded an OBE for his work. "I came back around October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2014 and ten days later, I found myself sitting in Buckingham Palace with the Queen. She was sitting on my right and I was sitting on her left. And when it came to my turn to start talking to her, she said, "I heard you've just come back from Aleppo." I said, "Yes, I have." And if you consider where I'd just come back from . . . the whole hospital was being blown up, everything around me was being shelled and I was coping with children that were badly, *really* badly damaged and she must have detected something significant because I didn't know what to say to her. It wasn't that I didn't want to speak to her, I just couldn't. I could not say anything. So she picked all this up. She said, "Well, shall I help you?" I thought, how on earth can the Queen help me?

All of a sudden, the courtiers brought the corgis and the corgis went underneath the table and she went to one of the courtiers and said, "Can we open up that please?" And so she opened up this lid and there were a load of biscuits and so she took one of the biscuits, she broke it in two and said, "Okay, why don't we feed the dogs?" And so, for twenty minutes, the Queen and I, during this lunch, just fed the dogs, and she did it because she knew that I was so seriously

traumatised. You know, the humanity of what she was doing was unbelievable . . . and we just talked about her dogs and how many she had and she was so warm and so wonderful and I'll never forget it."

Whatever your views on the monarchy as an institution, let us give thanks today for the Queen as a person, and for a long life of dedicated, selfless service deeply rooted in her Christian faith. When we look at many other world leaders and presidential candidates, we realise how rare are such shining examples of humanity and compassion.

Today the Mall is lined with 1700 picnic tables for "the Patron's lunch" with 10,000 guests from all the charities that have the Queen as their patron in what may well prove to be the world's largest street party. It will bring together people of all faiths and backgrounds to break bread together as they enjoy over 40,000 sandwiches.

But of course, lunch is strictly off the menu for our Muslim friends who are observing the holy season of Ramadan, which began on 6 June and ends after sunset on 5 July. During this time those observing the fast can only eat and drink before and after sunrise. Two weeks ago in this service, around this altar, we marked the end of this year's Winter Night Shelter and many of us this week attended the thank you meeting for volunteers from all 14 venues on Wednesday and the gathering of our own volunteers here yesterday to reflect on and review our experiences of the shelter. This has been the third year in which a synagogue has been one of the shelter venues and here at St James's, we've been joined by volunteers from City Circle, an inclusive space for balanced and critical discourse for British Muslims. Since launching in 1999, the charity has gained a reputation in its efforts of community cohesion through weekly discussions, and volunteer led projects in education and homelessness.

Working together with our Muslim friends has been a fantastic and enriching experience. So next Sunday we are delighted and excited to be

joining forces with City Circle to host an interfaith iftar - the evening meal which breaks the fast. Our interfaith art exhibition, *The Key*, will be well underway and so there will be a chance to explore and enjoy the forty ankhs, decorated by prominent and emerging Eastern and Western artists. We'll be welcoming the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, to be our keynote speaker and before the iftar, there'll be a panel discussion with Christian, Muslim and Jewish contributors sharing their experiences of working together to help and support those who are homeless. After a Q&A session, we will then break the fast together and our Muslims friends will have space downstairs in which to pray before we share in the iftar here in church.

As an act of solidarity, we invite you to consider fasting just for one day next Sunday. This would mean refraining from food and drink (including water) from 2.39am to 9.24pm. It is a particular challenge at this time of year, but remember, our Muslims friends are following this pattern not for a day but a whole month. Naturally you may like to make an exception to receive Holy Communion and it may well be that, if like me you have a medical condition such as diabetes, then you are not able to fast. Muslims who have such conditions or are pregnant or lactating are also exempt from the fast. It may be that you decide to refrain from food but to have water. It's up to you, but please do consider how you might join in this this act of solidarity. If you are able to come next Sunday evening, please do register with Eventbrite – you can find details in your order of service.

The unnamed woman who anoints Jesus in our Gospel reading takes a great leap of faith in breaking many customs and riding roughshod over etiquette in daring to gate-crash the Pharisee's dinner to tenderly wash Jesus's feet with her tears, dry them with her hair and then anoint them with precious ointment. In this most unconventional, heartfelt manner, she fulfils the customs of hospitality overlooked by the host. Hers are quiet acts of solidarity, humanity and compassion and are recognised as by such by

Jesus in front of the assembled guests. In other versions of this story, in words which connect us with the Last Supper, the Eucharist at the very heart of our faith, Jesus says that her story should be recounted "in remembrance of her". I was reminded of this story at the shelters get together on Wednesday, when one volunteer spoke of an abiding memory of watching one guest gently and tenderly bandaging the feet of another guest.

Those three images: the Queen and the traumatised medic feeding the dogs together from the top table, the woman anointing Jesus' feet and the shelter guest tending another guest's feet point us today to one abiding truth. Contrary to the old adage, it's not "manners that maketh man". Rather, our humanity is most fully and beautifully expressed in acts of empathy and compassion when we meet the needs that others, especially the vulnerable, may be unable to voice. Our humanity is fully realised when we learn, as we gather together around this table each week, how to be guests alongside one another.

And so I close with the famous poem by George Herbert:

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 lack'd anything.

'A guest,' I answer'd, '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 marr'd 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.

Amen.