

Occasion: 13th Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Luke 14:11-14

Date: September 1st, 2019

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As children, some of you may have read the fascinating book *Alice in Wonderland*. Alice falls asleep and has this amazing dream where everything seems to be upside down and back to front. She encounters White Rabbit with a pocket watch who is always running late, a Caterpillar who gives advice, a grinning and talking Cheshire Cat that keeps vanishing, the King and Queen of Hearts who are always saying "**Off with their heads!**"

Then there is the rude Mad Hatter who is always rebuking Alice for her rudeness, and Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee who like to recite poetry. Alice notices that everything is quite back to front in this strange world. She discovers surprise after surprise as she meets back to front people and creatures.

Reading the Gospels is never as confusing as the adventures of Alice in Wonderland, but sometimes you wonder if Jesus does get things back to front and upside down. Today's reading is an example of this. He says that **those who are great will be least in the Kingdom of God and those who are humble will be the greatest**. That's so back to front! The world would suggest that those who get ahead, the winners in this world, those who use their worldly wealth to make more wealth, the successful people; they are the ones whom you would expect Jesus to say will be the great people in God's Kingdom.

Then he adds that when inviting people to a dinner party, don't invite your friends, or relatives, neighbours as you would normally do. Rather invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. How ridiculous is that! Inviting every drunk, street kid, drug addict, or cheat you can find is sheer madness. Jesus is redefining what "**hospitality**" is. He doesn't say to send food to the down and outs, but that the host is to sit down at a meal table with them. This is so back to front. Who in their right mind would do something like this? When you think about it, it's not so different to the world Alice found herself in. So back to front.

And these aren't the only instances of Jesus back to front ideas. He said, "**For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.**" (Mark 8:35). And on several occasions, He commends the most unlikely people for their faith or good deeds, like the Samaritan leper, the tax collectors and prostitutes. Why doesn't He say nice things about the people whom you'd expect Him to speak favourably – God's people – the Jews.

Jesus is back to front and upside down. He does this to highlight that the ways of the Kingdom of God are not the same as that of the rest of the world. What is considered right and good in the world may not be the case in God's Kingdom. He gives us these back to front ideas **to help us re-examine what it is that we have accepted as right, whereas in actual fact they are not God's ways**.

It is so easy for a Christian to be so taken up with a certain attitude or way of life that is so opposite what God wants. The argument always goes, "**Everyone else is doing it.**" But just because everyone else is doing it, doesn't mean it is right and God-pleasing. Just because it is the trend to move in with a partner and live together before the commitment of marriage, that doesn't make it right. Just because

others at school are cheating, doesn't mean that this is right thing to do. Just because your friends ridicule people who are different for whatever reason, that doesn't mean that this is what God wants.

You see, it's so easy for us as God's people to quite unwittingly and unintentionally say things that are right when they are wrong. This is what Jesus is saying today in our text. God's ways can be so against what is the accepted standard in the rest of the world.

Why do we find following God's ways so hard and following the crowd so easy? Well, there are several reasons.

Firstly, there is the problem of standing out. If you adopt an attitude that is different to everyone else, you risk standing out. If you express what are God's ways in a discussion, you are afraid that you might be called a **"goody-goody"** or **"a religious fanatic"**. And so to avoid that, it's better to go along with everyone else.

Secondly, the ways of the world can be much more appealing and easier than those of the Kingdom of God. It's easier to be separated from your spouse or get a divorce than to go through all the hassles of trying to resolve the problems in a marriage.

Thirdly, the shift from God's ways and the ways of the world can be ever so subtle. This is one of Satan's cunning tricks. He makes you think that you are following the ways of God's Kingdom whereas in fact you are following his ways.

I have known people who are regular Sunday worshippers believe that there is nothing wrong with praying at a Buddhist shrine in their lounge room during the week. Somehow, along the way they came to believe there was nothing wrong with it. Their acceptance of this had been so subtle that they hadn't noticed the conflict with their Christian faith. This example may not seem so subtle and we may say, **"How could they?"**

The shift happened so slowly and so cleverly that they couldn't believe that they had been so easily led away from Jesus. Fourthly, the culture we live in is very good at producing popular trends. We call it the **"in thing"**. It's the **"in thing"** to wear certain style of clothes. It's the **"in thing"** for men and women to spend loads of money seeking the perfect looking body. It's so easy to follow what is **"the in thing"** without even checking whether this is what God wants you to do or not. You follow the crowd along without realising that what you are doing may not be what God wants. When we pause to think of the role of the family and its unique place in God's plan for the people of this world, it's a good idea to re-examine the way you are parenting your children, your role as a grandparent to the younger generations, the kind of son or daughter you have been.

Is your home one where parents spend time with children – playing together, working together, learning together, having fun together as well giving discipline when necessary. This goes against the **"in thing"** where parents offer very little discipline, and are so accommodating that their children get whatever they want. Is your home a place where Jesus is spoken about and taught frequently and parents model what it means to be a Christian in today's world? Does your home place too much emphasis on material happiness rather than happiness that comes from knowing Jesus?

Have you as a grandparent taken an interest in your grandchildren, perhaps even providing spiritual

direction where parents fail to do so? To follow God's ways may seem like the more difficult path, in fact the path that seems so back to front compared to the ways of the world. Jesus never promised that following God's ways would be the easiest path. This is the way God's people stand out from the rest of the world. We can witness to the world that there is a better way. We can give evidence to the world that being a baptized member of God's kingdom is something very special; that it makes a difference in the way we live our lives.

The question that remains to be answered is – **"how do I find out what is God's ways for my life and my family? What does it mean to live as members of God's Kingdom?"** The answer is simple – **God's Word, the Bible.** This is God's message to all of us and reveals to us God's Son. The Bible tells us the ways He wants His children to live. He wants us to read it and study and take in what it means to be members of the Kingdom of God. He wants us to learn how much He loves us. He wants us to be the Kingdom of God in the world and to make a difference. And the more we read it, the more we become aware that we are very poor at being members of God's kingdom.

Our sinfulness wants to take the easy path, to do the **"in thing"**, to follow the crowd and not stand out. Everyday our best intentions are sidetracked and we fall into sin, we deny that we are members of God's Kingdom. We can become quite upset and feel really bad that we have let God down again. The Bible reminds us that we are members of God's Kingdom simply and only because of what Jesus did for us on the cross. And every day he declares us **"forgiven"**. He makes us clean with His precious blood. And then He invites us to live as His people in His Kingdom.

Life in the kingdom of God is no walk in the park – it is hard work. Jesus' disciples were the first to understand this. May God grant us the wisdom and the ability of discerning what are God's ways and what are not so that we may faithfully follow Jesus, letting His light shine through us into our homes, neighbourhood and the world around us. In Jesus' name. Amen.