

A Maitre 'd in the House of God

A sermon preached for Asher Kirby's induction as the pastor of
Pleasant Street Baptist Church
Ballarat
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INTRODUCTION

George is a man I'll never forget. For more than 20 years, he was the Maitre 'd in the main dining room of the Grand Hotel. The Grand remains one of city's oldest and most refined hotels. A magnificent 19th century building, it sits proudly opposite the State Parliament. Its main dining room is indeed grand—beautifully proportioned and elegantly presented. As a young apprentice chef, I would often watch George standing at his post at the main door.

George was a gentleman's gentleman, always impeccably dressed and perfectly groomed. He was tall and slender with an irresistible presence. His soft Belgian accent set his voice apart from others, yet his absolute discretion kept his presence measured, never overwhelming. George was the first person a guest would meet on entering the dining room. He would greet each one warmly, requesting their names, offering to take their coats, and welcoming them to the Grand. The way he said 'the Grand' made it sound almost regal.

George had an extraordinary memory. If a guest had been to the restaurant before, no matter how many years previously, he was likely to greet them by name and express his pleasure at their return. He would then show the guests to their tables, pulling out each of their chairs and settling them in

as if they were the most important visitors he had ever received.

Having settled them in, George would then introduce his guests to their waiter, leaving them with the unmistakable sense that they were in good hands. Throughout the night he would discreetly check back in with each table, ensuring each party had everything they needed. And of course, upon their departure, he would be standing ready with their coats, expressing his delight to have had them as his guests for the evening and opening the door for them as they exited. Humorously, guests would often assume that George actually owned the Grand, such was his attentiveness. Of course, he didn't. In the early hours of each morning, he would catch the last train home to a little house in West Footscray where he lived with his wife and four children.

For twenty years, night after night, George never missed a beat, so utterly consistent, so endlessly gracious. George passed away some years ago now. I don't know who took his place, but I do know that in today's restaurants, people like George are rare. As many operators of finer eating establishments will tell you, a good maitre 'd is hard to find. It takes an unusual, refined set of skills and a special demeanour.

You see, above all, a good maitre 'd must know his place. He doesn't own the restaurant. He's not there to cook

the food. He doesn't design the menus. He's not even the boss. Yet he must stand at the door night after night, fully present, with an equal degree of confidence and grace, welcoming each guest as if into his own dining room. While he may not be in charge, he's a vital part of the restaurant's life and success. He's always on show. He's not allowed a bad day. Night after night, he's the first impression for every guest who walks through the door. His demeanour and approach will colour the entire experience.

A good maitre 'd will remember guests' names, their particular likes and dislikes. He will need to read every guest intuitively. Some will want familiarity and a long chat. Others will want a more formal or minimal relationship. He will need to have his eye on the entire dining room, read every sign, anticipate every movement. Should a guest arrive without a reservation, he will need to judge quickly what space he has available, responding calmly and graciously whatever the situation.

While a maitre 'd is certainly not the boss, he is to some degree the manager. He needs to keep the cooks happy, the floor staff alert. For a good restaurant is not just about good food and a full dining room. A successful restaurant is as much about its people, how they feel about their work, their contribution, what sense of ownership they have of the service they provide and where they provide it. A committed, empowered, harmonious team adds as much to the restaurant's success and long-term viability as anything else. A good maitre 'd is a servant, yet never subservient; competent, yet never controlling; gracious, yet never timid; responsible, yet never over-stepping his role.

THE STORY

The reading today is taken from Luke's gospel ... a story you've probably heard many times before. It's a good one! It's the story of a man—a very rich and important man—who, it says in verse 16, "*was preparing a great banquet.*" Perhaps he was the Jamie Oliver of Jerusalem, wealthy enough to own his own place with his name in gold lettering on the door and on the menu.

On this occasion, he had invited many guests; important ones; prominent religious leaders from the Jewish community; the Who's Who of the local synagogue. But when the time came for dinner, the seats were empty. It turns out the VIPs had all made excuses, rather feeble ones: a paddock, a cow, a wife. When the rich man heard this, the text tells us, "*he was angry.*" Why? Because, as a prominent Jew himself, he knew the score.

As devoutly religious people, these VIPs were consumed with their own social and religious standing. For them, eating dinner with someone was a serious business. Sitting beside someone at the meal table whose religious ancestry or moral standing was less than your own was, in their view, a dangerously compromising act. These VIPs had not seen the guest list; they had no control over who would be there and who wouldn't. As far as they were concerned, no matter how grand the banquet or how celebrated the chef, the social risk was too great.

The rich man's response was swift. With a feast prepared and no one to enjoy it, he threw open the doors, first to the socially challenged within the Jewish community—the poor, the blind and the crippled. While they may have been part of the Jewish neighbourhood, they were quite plainly

the wrong sort. They came, but there was still room. So the rich man threw the net even wider. He invited those outside the city—*“from the roads and country lanes”*—those who had no Jewish connections at all: the foreigners, the irreligious, the social outcasts. The rich man is determined: *“My house will be full!”* he declares.

It’s a great story, full of fascinating characters. But the character who appeals to me the most is not the rich man; it’s not the paranoid VIPs or the rather startled latecomers. It’s the servant—the maitre ‘d. Perhaps we could call him George. He was the one at work since dawn preparing, decorating, setting tables, ensuring everything was in its place; the one standing at the door waiting for the arrival of the guests who never came; the one sent out to remind those same guests that the banquet was ready; the one who had to return to an angry host bearing bad news; the one anticipating the master’s response, who, upon hearing his master’s command to invite others, was able to say *“It’s already been done;”* the one at the door to welcome the lame and the blind when they arrived for their free feed; the one taking their bedraggled and smelly coats and helping them to their seats, perhaps having to carry some or supporting others as they struggled to sit; the one then travelling out to the roads and laneways, inviting the outcasts and foreigners, having to convince them that the invitation was legitimate; the one overseeing the whole operation from beginning to end; the maitre ‘d.

This servant didn’t own the house. He didn’t prepare the banquet. His name was not the door or on the menu. Hardly noticed or acknowledged, he knew his place. Yet he never failed to

act as the consummate host, responding to each new challenge, and every guest, with competence and grace. He listened. He responded to each need as it arose. He anticipated the master’s needs even before they were named. And he obeyed his master’s commands promptly and competently. He must have been quite a find, this servant, this maitre ‘d.

AN INDUCTION

Today marks a new beginning for Pleasant Street Baptist Church. It’s an event worth celebrating. Today you’ve welcomed Asher and his family into your community. Even more, today you’ve inducted Asher as your pastor. It’s an exciting day.

There are all sorts of metaphors we could use for the role of a pastor: servant, shepherd, healer, teacher, companion, coach. But I’d like you to imagine for a moment that Asher is being installed today as the maitre ‘d of Pleasant Street.

Asher comes today to fulfil a vital role in the life of this church. He’s not come to possess the church. He’s not even come to be the boss. He has come as a servant, but one with a very particular role. His role will be prominent, front-of-house Sunday by Sunday, a role he will fill with grace and competence. He will be key to the experience of every guest that walks through the door, and key to every member of the team. But to do what he is gifted and called to do, he will need to understand as clearly what his role isn’t as what it is.

The truth is, Asher has not come to cook, or to wait on tables, to keep the books, set the menu, or repair the plumbing. He has come to fulfil a very particular role, to do what God has called, appointed and gifted him to

do—nothing more and nothing less. He will have an important role in enabling and empowering the team, keeping an eye on every part of the community's life and mission, anticipating changes in context and culture that must be responded to, spotting new opportunities and intuiting needs. He will have a unique role in caring for members of the community as well as though who come as guests. Above all, he will need to listen carefully to the owner, the one who called this community into being and ultimately sustains its life and guides its mission.

SOME ADVICE

With this image of the maitre 'd in mind, I offer some words of advice, first to Asher and secondly to the church community.

To Asher

Firstly, Asher, *keep out of the kitchen*. There is nothing more frustrating to a team than a maitre 'd who meddles in things he is not called or qualified to do. Ultimately it stymies the gifts of others and keeps the team from flourishing. In the process, the restaurant fails to reach its real potential, and so does the church. The key to effective leadership is to work out of your gifts and allow others to do the same. Living well with your limitations is as important as maximising your strengths.

This church community is full to the brim with gifted and wise people, people who have gifts and abilities you need, people who know this church and this community, people with insights and perspectives important to the flourishing of its ministry. A good maitre 'd works in such a way that others shine. In the very best sense, he

works in such a way that his contribution blends into the background, becoming just one part of the whole, a part often not even noticed or fully appreciated by those who arrive to feast. It's the sign of a job done well.

Secondly, Asher, *listen*. Listen to the one to whom this church belongs. A good maitre 'd always knows his place. This is not *your* church or *your* congregation or *your* pulpit. You are appointed for a time and for a specific task. You are not the first maitre 'd and you'll not be the last. But you've been chosen by a very discerning master, one who knows you better than you know yourself. You are appointed to work according to the master's plan, not your own. The servant in the story listened and responded obediently in every circumstance. In fact, he listened to well, so consistently, so attentively, that he began to intuit the master's vision even before it was spoken. The master will speak in all sorts of ways, through all sorts of people, texts and events. Learn to recognize his voice.

Thirdly, Asher, *take a seat*. A good maitre 'd knows what good service is like, he knows what true grace is, what genuine hospitality looks and feels like, because he has experienced it first hand. My friend George at the Grand once told me that in his early days as an apprentice waiter, his teacher and mentor would take George into the dining room in the early hours of the morning, once all the guests had left and the staff had gone home, and he would treat George as a guest. His teacher would dim the lights, put on some quiet music, take George's coat, sit him down at a fully set and candlelit table, serve him a three-course meal, and treat him as an honoured guest. Decades later, George could still recall

the experience in all its detail. This working-class boy was made to feel as important as any other person who walked through the door. It was an experience he never forgot.

Asher, the real wonder of this appointment is that the one who has appointed you loves you. He has not only called you to a specific task, he has called you into a relationship. And routinely he will pull out your chair and ask you to sit down. The feast is yours as much as it is anyone else's, prepared with you in mind. The trouble is, too many pastors never take time to sit. "*Sit down Asher,*" God will say, as he pulls out your seat. "*Not just now, Lord,*" you'll be tempted to respond, "*I have a sermon to prepare. Not just now, Lord, I have people to serve, phone calls to return, invitations to send, meetings to chair, strategic plans to implement. There's just no time.*" "*Sit down Asher,*" God will insist, "*Sit down!*" It is a simple fact that the most profound ministry of grace you offer will issue out of your own experiences of grace. If you want to know best how to serve the needs of others, if you want to know the master and his vision intimately, sit down.

To the church

Firstly, *remember to whom this church belongs.* Just as the maitre 'd must know his place, so must every member of the team. Those who've been around a particular restaurant for a long time can begin to assume ownership in a way that is unhealthy for the business. They can settle into particular practices and ways of operating that become obstructive to the future viability of the restaurant. It's important to remember that just as the maitre 'd does not own the place, so the cooks, the waiters, the cleaners, the business managers, the

bar staff don't either, no matter how long they've been around.

This church belongs to God. This is his banquet; this is his feast, his dining room. He called it into being; he sustains it; he calls the shots. Our shared task is to listen to the master, and to respond to his call with grace, commitment and competence.

Secondly, *be courageous.* The story in Luke's gospel paints a radical and challenging picture of God's kingdom. It's a confronting picture for the church. It is certainly not comfortable, predictable or safe. To be engaged in God's restaurant is a potentially life changing and life challenging call.

It is God who makes up the guest list. We have no say in who is invited and who isn't. The seating arrangements and dress requirements have nothing to do with us. Should the master wish to change from sit-down silver service to a cafeteria-style buffet, that's his call. We should be conscious of the ease with which we can become like those who made their excuses, those who had pre-determined what the host could do and could not do, who the host could invite, and what the seating arrangements would be.

God is sending you today a new maitre 'd. Perhaps it signals a change of direction in the master's plan. Be open. Part of your pastor's role will be—in conversation with the master and with you—to discern the best way forward, the best way to embody the radical and inclusive grace of God in this neighbourhood. Work with him. Listen with him. Serve with him. Be a people of courage, hope and vision together.

Finally, *take care of your maitre 'd.* I know Asher. In calling this man to be your pastor, I can say with confidence, you have scored! Good pastoral

leaders are not easy to come by, just as a good maitre 'd is a rare and valuable find. Oh, he's not perfect, and he'll have his bad days. He will make some mistakes. And occasionally he will face the master's rebuke, as well as yours too I am sure! But look after him. Be gentle with him. Encourage and affirm him. Laugh with him. Listen to his heart. Take care what you expect of him. Free him to work to his strengths. And remember, at the end of each day he returns to home to be a spouse, a father, a son, a brother, a neighbour and a friend. If this church and its demands become his entire life, he won't last the distance, and ultimately the church and its mission will suffer.

CONCLUSION

George died some years ago now. I was not able to go to his funeral. But I am told he was buried in his three-piece suit. As his coffin was lowered into the ground, his wife, his adult children and grand children stood around the grave. And surrounding them, in a large circle, were the staff of the Grand, all dressed in their service uniforms. They had come to say goodbye to a maitre 'd whose impact had gone far beyond the experience of the guests. He was a servant faithful to his role, to his family, to his community and to his master. May the same be true of you, Asher: a maitre 'd in the house of God.

And may God bless you.

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