

JESUS SAT AT DINNER IN THE HOUSE . . . (Matt 9:10-13)

This may seem a strange text to choose for this occasion, the opening of MASH, the Mission – Action - Spirituality hub in Community South C. The text, however, kept returning to my consciousness as I prepared for today. And so it seemed appropriate to let it inform our gathering and our celebration. Let me first put it into context....

¹⁰And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹² But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

Jesus sat at dinner in *the house*. The first thing that the Matthean text makes explicit is that this is not just any house that is the referent; it is not 'a' house but it is 'the' house. It is an identified house. It is one that would be recognized by the listeners to the Matthean story of Jesus. And this is so because earlier in the story readers/listeners learnt that Jesus made his home in Capernaum. The Matthean Jesus had a house, a material space that he returned to, from which he went out, and in which he carried out his mission. Today we celebrate a similar house, a similar material space, a place, a hub for Mission, for Action, for Spirituality in Community South C. It will be a place that will send people out for mission and welcome them back. But it is more than that, it is a place where mission, action spirituality can be enacted, enacted in place.

If we return to Matt 9:10 we find that *... as he/Jesus sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples*. Jesus' house was a place of gathering, but even more than that, a place of table hospitality. In particular, it was a place of table hospitality with the outsiders, with the marginalized. Tax collectors in first century Galilee were considered a despised group because of their dealings with the occupying power/Rome. They were ostracized as were the group called 'sinners' in a society that had very clear boundaries around clean/unclean; insider/outsider. Jesus and his disciples sit at table with a group of those marginalized by such boundaries. They recline together on the same couches. They reach out and take from the same vessels, they break bread together sharing table hospitality. It is this that the material space of the house makes possible.

And so, as we allow this Matthean text and imagery to resonate with this Mercy Hub, this physical space, we can imagine what will be possible in this space. It has the potential to be a place of welcome as was Jesus' house, a place of welcome not only of friends but also the stranger, the marginalized, the ostracized in our day, twenty-first century 'tax collectors and sinners'. Who will sit around its tables? With whom will those who find their place here share a meal; with whom will they recline at table?

As those for whom this becomes their Mercy Mission Hub welcome the strangers, the displaced, the outcast, there will, no doubt, be those who judge, who comment, who critique as did the Pharisees who witnessed Jesus' shared table hospitality. Why do these Mercy women eat with the outsiders? Why are they bringing these people into our respectable neighbourhood? Why? Jesus shared such critiques as did Catherine when she set up a house of mercy within the upper echelons of nineteenth century Dublin bringing into the neighbourhood the homeless poor. The question *who will you eat with in this mercy hub* seems to resonate across the sacred narratives that have informed this space from the Jesus story through Catherine to today. Who will you eat with? Who will you welcome...?

The failure of Jesus' critics to understand his action in the context of their sacred tradition of welcoming the stranger, the outcast, the widow and the orphan leads Jesus himself to turn to that tradition. First he draws on a human experience allowing it to function as a metaphor: it is not those who are well who need a physician but those who are sick. All his listeners like us here today can enter into, can appropriate this metaphor—of course it is those who are sick who need a doctor. The challenge, however, is allowing the metaphor to throw light on our experience. And lest we miss the imagery, Jesus becomes more explicit drawing on the prophet Hosea: I desire mercy, not sacrifice.

The final words of Jesus in this short text are most appropriate to the celebration here today. *Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'* Mercy, the virtue, the value that underpins this hub must be learnt in the situations encountered here. Jesus had to discern whether his house would be open to those named as 'tax collectors' and 'sinners' in his day. So too, those who gather in this space will need to learn how it can be a place of mercy and what that mercy means today. They will reflect on their actions that take place here and elsewhere; they will dialogue with their sacred traditions as did Jesus. In this way, this place will become Community South C Mercy Hub. It will become a place of mission—action—spirituality. We gather with you here today to pray a blessing on all that will take place here in this house so that like the house of Jesus in Capernaum, it too may be a place of mercy, a place of mission where mercy is learnt.

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