

Did I sit at his table, or he at mine? CHURCH TIMES 24 JULY 2020

Revd George Pitcher keeps a lunch date with Jesus



Supper at Emmaus (c.1633-39) by Matthias Stom

(Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid)

HE'S LATE. It's past lunchtime. It's Friday, and the usual crowds have dwindled. The sun, low now, is shining in on me at my window seat. It's a place I come when I want to be on my own. They know me here. It's a good place. A thin place.

I've drunk a little wine as the hours passed. Red, then white. I'm a little heady but not pissed, listening to the rhythms of words, outside in the street and inside me. Like a prayer.

A waiter comes and stands by my table, between me and the window. He's in a bright white smock, and I squint up into the light. "Why are you waiting?" he asks. "I'm waiting for my friend," I say. "I said why, not who," he says, not unkindly. "How long are you going to wait?"

"He'll come." "But why are you waiting here?" "I booked this table. Name of Pitcher." "George," he murmurs. And he slips in to sit opposite me. He's looking down at his hands on the table. Like suddenly he's waiting to be served himself. "Have you just started working here?" I ask. "No, I've been working for ages." Still, he doesn't look up. And I remember now. I've watched him, cleaning tables, bringing food. I just hadn't looked at him. "Thank you for being here, George."

Strangely, it's a voice that I find I recognise. "Rabbi?" I say, and now he looks up. "*Shalom*," he says with a smile, and I start back from the table edge. "Come on. Don't be afraid." He takes a bread roll from the basket, breaks it in half, and holds a piece out to me. He shrugs. "Shall I say grace?" he asks.

YES, I know you want to know what he looks like. But there's the thing: familiar is all I can say. Like someone you've always known but, as in a dream, won't be specified. The light falls and he's dark, then fair in the setting sun. Younger, then older. Is the hair long or tied back? I can't remember. Rough, then pretty. Giotto or Caravaggio. You or me? You and me.

I suppose I should say that when he looks at me, it's as if he's always known me, or it's like he's looking right through me. That his eyes are like doves. That he's gentle, like a mother. But none of that works. He's simply here, present. There's no impression to be made beyond that. Sorry.

"I'm thirsty," he says, and I pour some water from a pitcher. Then more wine. "We were meant to have lunch," I say. "It'll be time for supper soon." "Call it lunch," he says. "It's meant to be lunch, right? We're in my time." And he looks out into the fading light. "It'll soon be sabbath." "*Shabat*," I say. "Call it what you will. Tell me what you want."

"I wanted to eat with you. At your table." "You do that all the time, George. You're a priest. Isn't that what you say? 'Come to this table.' But this is your table. Why have you called me to your table?"

"It's for a book. We get to have lunch with someone we love who's dead. They asked me to have lunch with you." "Do you love me?" "I don't know — I'd like to try. I got ordained; so I must a bit. Someone has to feed your lambs." "AND do I look dead?" "I told them you weren't dead. You're the only one in the book who isn't." "Awkward." "But you were dead once, right? Really dead." He stares at me. "George. Do I look one thousand nine hundred and eighty-seven years and eighty-four days old?" "No." "Good. Then I'm alive. But I've been dead. Is that so hard?" "Well, yes, actually," I say. "At any rate, it does put you in rather a different category to the other subjects in the book."

"So far. So they asked you to interview me because they think I'm dead? Interesting." "I know," I say sheepishly. "It's a category error. One that's easily made by people who haven't met you, I guess. The editor said she's a lapsed Jew. I told her, well, you're kind of a lapsed Jew, too." He smiles again, like he really is a category error.

Then he holds out his hands, white and strangely feminine: “Touch me.” I slowly take one hand. It’s warm. I feel for the hole in the palm. It holds mine. “I have to ask,” I say. “Do you really need to eat?” “I’ll have the fish,” he says.

And we talk. We talk endlessly, as it gets darker. About friends, about what we’ve done, about what we love to do, about joyous stuff and very dark things. It comes easily. Except that I realise afterwards that he doesn’t tell me anything about him —it’s all about me. When I ask questions about him, it’s just turned around. A line from a musical comes to me. “Are you who they said you were?” “I am. Are you?” “That Mary from Magdala. Tell me about her.” “She gives her love to you. What will you give her?” “The stories — are they really true?” “Someone once asked me what is truth. What do you think is true?” I persist: “But were you . . . accurately reported?” “You were a journalist before you were a priest. Do you believe everything you read? Or just the truth?” AND SO I do all the talking. Or rather, I do all the telling, while he eats with his hands. I wonder if he’s there or if I’m imagining him. But the other waiters fill his glass. And I notice a woman, who sits on the bench seat at the next table, glance at him and move her bag a little closer to her. I want to shout, “This is the living Christ, for God’s sake! He’s not going to steal your purse!” “I might, George. They always thought I was a criminal.” “Of course. You knew what I was thinking,” I say. “Why do you want me to tell you about me, if you know it all already?” “I want to know if you know it.” “But you’d know that, too.” The waiter brings more bread. Had he asked for it? Weird.

Then, suddenly, he takes the conversational initiative: “Was the lamb good?” I hadn’t noticed what I’d been eating. “Yes. Very good. Thank you.” “It is finished,” he says. I look down at my empty plate. “Oh, that’s terrible,” I say. “Truly terrible.” And he laughs for the first time, a guttural chuckle, full of life.

“It’s time you got on,” he says eventually. “It’s getting late. And I have people to serve.” “You’re going to be a waiter again?” “No.” “Forgive me,” I say. “Yes, I’d better go. I’ll get the bill.” “I’ve already paid,” he says. I look at him hard, but he doesn’t recoil. “Will you stop that?” I say. “Stop what?” he says.

“Stop it with the double meanings. . . The Son of Man isn’t meant to do one-liners, dreadful puns.” “You haven’t been listening closely enough. Where do you think you get them from?” I’m feeling resentful now. “I thought you’d have something to tell me.” “I do.” “What?” “I’ve already told you. You’re the vicar, remember? You’re the expert on what I have to say.” I look at my own hands. “They always say: ‘What would you ask him if you had just one question?’”

“WELL?” Slowly I say: “My question is — what do you want to tell me?”

“What do you want me to say?” he asks. “That I love you? That everything will be all right? That you have a Father in Heaven?” He’s speaking quickly now. This is what he’s come to say. “Do you want me to make everything all right? Is that it? I can’t take away what you’ve done, all the stuff you’ve brought to this table tonight and haven’t told me, the life you’ve led that you won’t confess even to yourself. I can’t stop people hating you for it. But they hated me before they hated you. Remember that, George. Shit happens.”

“I didn’t think you’d talk like this.” “It’s your voice, George. Language you understand. Quite Pentecostal, no?” A calmer beat. “So, again, what do you want me to say? That I’m really here?” “No, I suppose not.” “And why would that be?” Suddenly he’s leaning in, looking for my answer. Like a teacher. I pause for a moment, looking into his eyes, before answering: “Because I already know that.” “Because you already know that,” he repeats slowly.

“Now go and write this up. And try to tell the truth for once.” A pause, then barely audible, a voice in my head: “Write it in peace. Write it as a prayer.” We sit for a moment more in silence as I try to think of something to say.

“Thanks for coming,” I say eventually. Another pause, and he says softly: “Now you’re doing it, y’see.” I stand up and wonder if a hug is in order, but it doesn’t seem necessary. “*L’chaim*,” I say, and he nods. “Cheers,” he replies.

At the door, I see its dark outside. I’m not going to turn around, because I’m pretty sure he won’t be there. But I do. And he is, still watching me. I raise a hand in salutation, and he raises his, the first two fingers together and pointing upward, the next two folded down into his palm, touching the thumb, like in a painting.

This is an edited extract from One Last Lunch: A final meal with those who meant so much to us, edited by Erica Heller, published by Abrams Press.