+ ‘Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves and you hindered those who were entering.’

As the new academic year begins, the Dean and Canons find themselves entering a demanding season of dinners: following a Gaudy last week, we will enjoy a dinner to welcome new students, and two for new senior members this week and next; then two more to mark our patronal festival for St Frideswide (one with representatives from city and shire, the other with the college of canons); as well as a raft of dinners for special occasions, to say nothing of those we might have planned with our own friends and family. Since eating together plays such a central role in all human societies, we should not be surprised how often the evangelists wrote about Jesus and food. They recounted meals that Jesus shared, not just with his own friends in their homes, but also with others; sometimes with those whom his contemporaries regarded as social outcasts – tax collectors and sinners – but at other times, perhaps more unexpectedly, with the religious elite.

This is the second of three occasions on which Luke had Jesus accept an invitation to dine with a Pharisee. (cf Luke 7: 36-50; and Luke 14: 1-24). We can understand all three not just as formal meals (eaten in the Greek and Roman style, reclining on couches) but as written to conform with a specific literary form, that of the Hellenistic symposium, most familiar to a modern audience in Plato’s *Symposium*. As a set-piece literary device the symposium revolved around an invitation, especially an invitation to the chief guest – ‘a Pharisee invited him to dine with him’ – and the meal. The chief guest was invited for his wisdom, wit and perspicacity; he was expected to demonstrate each of these via the conversation he would lead over the meal, showing his capacity to defeat opponents through the force of his argument. (At least the Canons don’t have to do this at any of the many dinners we are having to eat; although the Dean will not always be so lucky). On the occasion about which we heard in our gospel, Jesus’ superior standing to the others invited (both the other Pharisees and the lawyers) was clearly recognised by those who were present: the lawyer who addressed him directly called him didaskale, teacher.

Jesus certainly conformed to his hosts’ expectations by engaging his fellow guests in debate over matters that were both topical and highly controversial. He demonstrated his capacity to use Scripture to bolster his argument, at one point quoting ‘the wisdom of God’ (although in a passage not now identifiable within the Hebrew Scriptures, it is similar to one in 2 Chronicles, 24:19). Yet he did so in ways they can scarcely have imagined and clearly found distinctly uncomfortable. Can we be surprised that ‘When he went outside, the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile towards him’?

In his final diatribe, aimed at the lawyers present, Jesus accused his fellow diners of having taken away the key of knowledge, and thereby hindered all who would enter into faith. Jesus’ anger rested centrally on that failure in the Pharisees’ and lawyers’ stewardship of the
mystery of God. All their learning, their close textual focus on the law and its proper interpretation, they had frittered away into pointless preoccupation with minor details of no importance. They thereby deprived the people – for whom they should have been unlocking the meaning of scripture – of the sorts of understanding that might have brought them closer to salvation. Jesus’ illustrative arguments against the Pharisees show just how petty all this was, dwelling on their obsession with the precise rules about ritual purity, their insistence on exacting tithes, one tenth of all produce, not only from food staples like grain, which should as Deuteronomy demanded, be used for the support of the poor, but even the herbs used for seasoning. Their failure, he portrayed as a failure of leadership.

Leadership has become a buzz-word in the modern Church of England, particularly since the arrival of Archbishop Justin at Lambeth; our own Dean has published a number of articles reflecting critically on this trend and what it means for the church. But the shift is not a new one, as noted by the authors of the Faith and Order Commission report on Senior Church Leadership in 2015, who pointed out that it really began to become prominent in the 1960s (following a decade of sharp decline in church attendance), and took off in the 1980s. Thus, the New English Bible, published in 1961, referred in the first epistle of Timothy to ‘leaders or bishops’ and those ‘who aspire to leadership’ (1 Timothy 3: 1-2), where earlier translations had just read ‘bishop’. Similarly, in 1982 an ecumenical document on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (the Lima text), said of ordained ministers that they are ‘called to exercise wise and loving leadership’ (Ministry, §16), and depicted bishops as having ‘responsibility for leadership in the Church’s mission’ (§29).

What those of us inside the Church who have struggled with in the new articulations of the need to train priests for future management roles in the church is how untheological and unecclesial they are, characterised instead by ‘mind-numbing and uncritical use of executive management-speak’, to quote Dean Percy, writing in the Church Times. The fact that the Church, like any social body, needs people who lead is self-evident, and has been to generations of Christians. My own historical period produced two justly-celebrated manuals on leadership within the Church: Benedict of Nursia’s little Rule for beginners, with its wise guidance to the abbot on how to manage his monastic community, and the more wide-ranging Pastoral Care by Pope Gregory the Great. That is a wonderful how-to-do-it book for bishops, the second chapter of which carries the caption: ‘Those would not take on the office of governing who do not fulfil in their way of life what they have learned by study.’ The chapter ends with a reflection on the warning found in Matthew and Luke’s gospels against those who scandalise little ones who believe in Christ, who Jesus says would be better dead, with a millstone round their necks (Matt 18: 6; Luke 17: 1): ‘if a man vested with the appearance of holiness destroys others by word or example, it were better for him that his earthly deed should press him to death, rather than that his sacred offices should have pointed him out to others for sinful imitation.’ We could equally read this chapter beside today’s denunciation of Pharisees and Lawyers.

Jesus’ fellow diners were men of status, high education, and deep knowledge. Their long training taught them much about the law and the proper manner of its observance, and they were certainly ‘vested with the appearance of holiness’. Yet their use of the wisdom they acquired was essentially hypocritical: it did not lead to the bringing in of the kingdom; it did
not help little ones to find their way, because these men neglected justice and the love of God in favour of their own self-serving interests. Our church needs the same sorts of leaders that Pope Gregory hoped to find, people devoted to meditating on the sacred law, able to teach and admonish their flocks through holy living, preaching in word and deed. Of course it needs people with financial experience and management expertise to run its organisational systems and effectively to steward its resources, which include people, not just buildings and money. But I need persuading that MBAs are more useful to bishops than doctorates in theology. The fact that Archbishop Rowan’s retirement means that no current bishop has ever taught in a University department of Theology (although some have taught in theological colleges) reveals much about the state we are in.

Jesus did not criticise his dinner guests for their learning; he complained about the ends to which they put that learning. ‘For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves and you hindered those who were entering’. His is a conception of leadership as service, one in which the Pharisees and Lawyers had failed; their concern for outward forms (and above all their own status) meant that they had forgotten their call to justice and the love of God. As a church, we need to remember the service to which Christ calls all of us. Greater expectations placed on those who serve at his altar, or who hold high office, but all of us are called to work for the kingdom, as individual members to use the gifts we have been given in the Lord’s service for the whole body of Christ.

A German friend of mine currently visiting the UK recently shared on social media a sentence she found in a guide book for Westminster Abbey with a beautifully-mixed metaphor: "The church is not packed in aspic like a museum, but continues to evolve." Obviously, the Church continues to evolve, and it must do so to fit itself for the needs of each new generation; that may well mean that it needs to be managed differently. But it also needs to hold onto the importance of its historical roots, to treasure the wisdom of earlier generations of Christians, and to seek out afresh the keys that will open knowledge in changed social and cultural circumstances. Jesus showed how the path followed by Pharisees and lawyers led to hypocrisy, and thus to death. There are manifestly similar dangers in following too blindly a path marked out for us by management consultants, who promote models of leadership focused on the gifts and charisma of the individual.

Jesus preached the way of humility and service; we should aspire to model ourselves on those ideals. This gospel warns directly against the promotion of the individual, the seeking of status in synagogue or society. Woe to you who love the seats of honour in the cathedral and to be greeted with respect on Cornmarket. (11: 43) Jesus’ way involves repentance, turning both from teaching narrowly focused on the law, and from any sense of our own superiority (in learning, virtue or industry). Jesus’ way will also lead to death – to his own death, to which those same Pharisees condemned him. But through his death, he brings us life. A life untrammelled by the wrong rules and the wrong laws, but governed by the true law, and informed by the only true model of leadership: Christ’s own.