

Sunday between 28th August and 3rd September [22]

Luke 14:1 (2-6) 7-14

Today's readings give us some insight into the kingdom of God and the place of hospitality and humility within it. In our gospel reading, beginning at the first of chapter 14, we find Jesus at a Pharisee's house for dinner. In fact, it's important to note that much of the surrounding verses have to do with a feast. Jesus never seems to be far from a party. This theme of a meal is one of two that tie the events and teachings of this chapter together and helps to make a complete whole. Furthermore, He seems to be quite dedicated to insulting His hosts. At this Pharisee's party the leaders are provoked by Jesus to adjudicate on whether healing on the sabbath is sinful. The pharisees don't answer so Jesus performs the healing, but we know from previous encounters that the leaders of the synagogues taught that healing on the sabbath should be considered work and therefore forbidden. Jesus, in performing this healing miracle in the home of a pharisee was making it very clear that the previous healing was no accident and neither had he changed his mind on doing this in light of the criticism he received, Jesus always puts the needs of people ahead of the rules and regulations when those rules do harm.

Despite knowing that this action would not be well received, Jesus goes on to use his invitation to teach the pharisees about humility. Without being asked, and upon viewing the way in which the other guests had seated themselves at this dinner, Jesus gives some advice about seeking the lowest seat at a banquet rather than the highest. This contrast of high versus low is the second, but most important, theme of these teachings. We look down on the Pharisees as childish in jockeying for preferred seating positions, yet how many of us likewise have ignored Jesus' advice and promote "number one"? After all, we live in a society which tells us that if we don't look after no 1, who will? Jesus has turned our priorities upside down.

We are not even free of it within our church structures. Have you ever been at a large-scale church event, perhaps an ordination or the diocesan Chrism Eucharist, where many clergy and officers of the diocese are present? If you have you will be familiar with a long line of people, dressed in robes and various other items of finery, seeming to know how they fit into the hierarchy of the group. The reality is that there is usually a fair amount of chaos outside trying to get everyone in their proper place. But the point here is that we have an order, and that order is biblically based. The first shall be last and the last shall be first. Diocesan processions begin with the ordination candidates, then the deacons, then the priests, then the canons, on it goes until finally we get to the bishop at the very end. The intent is to follow the teaching of Jesus but the reality is that instead of looking for seniority at the front, people have learned to understand that the order is reversed, so it doesn't really have the desired effect if we understand that the seniority is measured back to front, yet it is a good reminder that Jesus' way is upside down when compared with the world.

Before we continue to the next teaching of our Lord, consider this question. How many of you have ever thrown a party? Who did you invite? Friends? Relatives? If so, you have just disobeyed a direct command of Christ. How so? We're told at the end of our gospel reading today in vs 12 - 14:

"When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbours ... [instead,] invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind..."

Of those who said they had thrown a party, how many of you have ever invited a homeless person? A disabled person you didn't already know? Someone doing it tough who was being overlooked by the rest of society? It is hard to think of anyone who actively obeys this command on a regular basis, yet here it is in black and white. Not only that, but this command is not primarily given to help the poor, as important as that is, but rather it is given to help us understand what God has done in inviting us to God's party. If God has been so gracious to us, oughtn't we be the same toward others?

The dinner Jesus attended, His healing on the Sabbath, His chastisement of the Pharisees for seeking places of honour, and finally, His command to invite the poor and not your friends to your parties, sets the stage for the well-known parable, which we didn't actually hear today but you can look it up later, "The Great Supper".

The gist of this story is easy enough to understand. A nobleman sends out invitations, prepares a huge party, and then informs the invitees that it's time to come. The response is underwhelming, to say the least. In fact, they stay away in droves, making quite poor excuses. Undeterred, the host will not have an empty house, so he instructs his servants to scour the streets for all the poor, lame, and blind. Of course, what this means is the uncouth, the smelly, and the drunks. You might think that this is quite enough, that the host has proved his generosity, but he is not finished, yet. The host is a great man and the house is a great mansion. Not satisfied with people from the local streets, he commands his servants to bring in those from even further away, from the highway and the hedges, the boulevards and the bushes and compel them to come. He wants every seat filled so that none of the original invitees, even if they change their mind, will have a place.

This parable is a perfect illustration to the teaching we heard from Jesus this morning about how we ought to understand and follow God's command to love our neighbour and in so doing to understand who our neighbour is. Jesus is very clear in both his teaching and the parable he uses to follow it up, the invitation we ought to be sharing to our banquets and by extension to be in relationship with those we invite, are most valuable when the person we look to bless with the invitation is not chosen for what they can give to us in return, but rather is chosen in order for the blessing to be its own reward. This teaching extends not just to personal encounters but also to ministry encounters. We should not, in ministry, be engaging people with an idea of what they ought to give back in return, this is transactional as opposed to grace filled.

In Jesus' parable none of the guests, neither the rich and high society of the first wave of invited guests nor the poor and homeless of the second - have any intention of coming to this party. Each of us has our own agenda and we are always at risk of making assumptions about other people, its human nature, but Jesus tells us that we need not be concerned with that. We are not in control of who God calls to faith or into our church communities, we should also resist the urge to only spend time just with people who are like us or who we like. Humility and hospitality are key to Christian living and practicing both will transform our relationships. Humility will allow us to understand better those around us as we put their needs and preferences first. Hospitality will draw to us people we otherwise may not have encountered and by welcoming with humility and serving with hospitality we will truly see glimpses of the wonder of how God's Kingdom will be for us all.