Sermon for 22nd in Ordinary Year C

Readings: Jeremiah 2:4-13; Hebrews 13:1-8,15-16; Luke 14:7-14.

i

When I walk into McDonald’s or KFC, I consult the menu board rather than a seating plan: Where I sit to eat my chicken nuggets matters not a jot to me, the other diners, or the staff. For huge numbers of people such informal dining arrangements will be the norm.

In this respect, I have to admit that I am far from the norm; I have been to many, many meals throughout my adult life where I have had to scrutinise a seating plan before taking my place. Wedding functions will be the most familiar sort of formal dining setting for most people today, but I have been to so many wedding receptions, dining-in nights in the officers’ mess, church dinners and embassy functions that it is a familiar practice to me to consult a seating plan before I take my place.

Due to my clerical status, I am very often accorded a place at the top table; sometimes I have even been the chief guest of honour. Whilst I hope I have not become a pompous stuffed-shirt, I do understand the need in such formal settings for protocol and form; to **receive** social honour graciously is as important as **according** social honour to someone – for in accepting a position of honour, you are honouring the person according you that respect.

This must sound quite bizarre to people who are not familiar with such formal occasions, but Jesus and his contemporaries would understand it very well indeed.

When Jesus dines at a Pharisee’s house, these sorts of complex social matters about status are being played out.

It seems an odd sequence to us for this section about honour at the dining table to follow on from a story about a healing of a man with dropsy, but there is logic to it.

Dropsy is the old-fashioned word for the swelling or edema caused by fluid retention. Unfortunately, in the ancient world it was associated with greed – both in terms of over-eating and self-indulgence, but also a moral greed that expressed itself in pride and self-importance – a character trait that would often express itself in assuming the most honourable place at table, whatever the company.

Jesus has come to cure such greed.

This has two distinct levels of interpretation. Let us start with the obvious one: personal pride and the need for humility.

ii

Jesus calls for humility on the part of his followers:

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time (1 Peter 5:6).

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves (Philippians 2:3).

And after Jesus has placed a small child in front of the crowd, Jesus turns the social structure upside down, by saying:

Therefore, anyone who humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:4).

Humility is an elusive spiritual treasure. To have it is a great prize; to claim you have it is to lose it.

Humility is also frequently misunderstood. Humility is not the same as thinking badly about oneself. Excessive self-criticism leads to chronic under-confidence and depression. Clearly that is not God’s intention.

Neither is humility based on fear. We do not humble ourselves before God because he’s some kind of tyrant. We are called to “hallow” God’s name, but also to “love God” and love “drives out all fear” (1 John 4:18).

The word *humility* comes from *humus* which means *soil.* Humility starts by acknowledging one’s mortality and human limitations. Belief in God immediately sets our understanding of our own importance and our own talents into a healthy cosmic context.

As mortal creatures, and in traditional biblical language as sinners, we are called to accept our frailties, whilst also rejoicing in our talents. Knowing that God has forgiven us, so we are enabled to “forgive those who have trespassed against us”.

Humility allows us to accept the faults of others and their short-comings, and also enjoy their talents without envy, knowing that God has bestowed gifts generously upon all his children.

Humility is the path that leads to peace, both peace of spirit and peace between people and nations, whilst still promoting the use of God-given talents and the rewards that sustained effort will bring.

Humility is not a highly esteemed virtue in today’s self-assertive, aggressively competitive world; but actually, humility is for our own benefit. It brings inner peace, wholesome relationships and spiritual sensitivity.

Iii

So what is this second level of interpretation I mentioned earlier?

Well, it is all about the symbolism of the wedding feast. Jesus has been invited to a meal at the Pharisee’s house. Jesus then tells a story about how to behave at a **wedding feast**.

This is a clear allusion to the Messianic banquet which is often compared to a wedding feast. We find the same symbolic language throughout the NT. In the *Book of Revelation*, the Church is compared to a bride meeting her bridegroom.

Suddenly, Jesus’ teaching takes on another level of meaning; it becomes a political and theological message, not just a moral one about the virtue of humility.

Jesus is warning the Pharisee and his friends against the presumption of honour at the messianic banquet. Luke will see the irony of this: the Pharisee will play the role of host at this meal at which Jesus is being treated as a guest. Little does the Pharisee perceive that one day Jesus will be the host at the messianic banquet and the Pharisee may or may not find himself one of the honoured guests!

The people Jesus suggests merit an invitation, the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, are the sort of people the Pharisee assumed deserved God’s displeasure and would be excluded from the messianic banquet.

Jesus is re-drawing the seating plan! The Pharisee had better take stock.

Spiritual pride also features strongly in Jeremiah’s prophesy against the people in the years leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile.

They had grown over-confident in their prosperous times; they had forsaken their God, forgotten the debt they owed for having been ransomed from slavery. They had thrown God aside as worthless and gone after other, false gods. They felt they could live off their past, by simply saying, this is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord – as if their appeal to a lost faith could guarantee them safety.

This is a charge we could level against much of Western culture; we have become complacent, self-assured in our own powers; we revere the materially affluent, no matter how vacuous their celebrity, and mock the religiously pious.

Such pride often comes before a fall. When the West next needs to call upon the moral courage and spirit of sacrifice to withstand the latest threat to our democratic, civilised values – will those same moral strengths be at hand to defend civilisation from another dark age? Or will people be so self-centred, absorbed by trivia and ephemeral fame and superficial bling that people will ignore the gathering clouds of violent extremism until it is too late to resist?

Will the moral war be lost because the West has consigned to the museum spiritual moral treasures bought at great cost over many centuries?

Jeremiah said that they had forsaken the spring of living water – a symbol for the spirit of God – and had dug their own cisterns to store their water. Water in such a dry and hot climate has always been of constant concern: As should God be our constant concern in this life.

Yet their cisterns are cracked and empty. When they need to find water in them during the hottest season of the year, they will find them empty.

The irony is that Jeremiah was saved by such an empty cistern. Eventually, the hierarchy of Jerusalem got so tired of Jeremiah’s remonstrations they threw him down a well.

Fortunately for Jeremiah, it was empty, thus he was not drowned, and was later rescued from his make-shift prison.

The calling of the Christian is set out for us in the passage from *Hebrews 13.*

We should never fall victim to the pride that thinks itself superior to God, as those that made their own gods in the days of Jeremiah.

Nor should we use our confidence in Christ to turn into lazy, self-satisfied triumphalism, as the Pharisee and those who scrambled for the higher places of honour at the table.

The *Letter to the Hebrews* commends a simple humility that befriends the stranger and the prisoner without concern about social position.

Adultery can be seen as another manifestation of arrogance and greed. So too is the love of money (Hebrews 13:4-5).

What gives us total security without chasing after the false securities of the world is the knowledge that God is with us and will never forsake us.

Whenever we are tempted to think that God’s presence is not enough, or that we can do better for ourselves, we are taking that dangerous step of pride that could eventually lead to a mighty fall.

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