

Sermon for Sunday 28th September 2022

Preached at St Michael Smarden

Hebrews 13:1-8,15-16; Luke 14:1,7-14

Sermon

It's something of a relief to emerge from the series of gospel readings in which Jesus accuses all the serious religious people of being hypocrites. In verses 2 to 6 of this chapter, he does have one more go at the Pharisees after they criticise him for healing on the sabbath, but the lectionary takes pity on us and excludes those verses from today's gospel reading.

Instead, we are focussed on another of Jesus' reversals of the natural social order – the order in which guests sit at a banquet or wedding feast. In a traditional feast in Jesus' day, all the male guests would recline on couches near the centre of the room. The higher your rank, wealth or power, the closer to the centre you would be. The very centre position was reserved for the guest of honour. If, as often happened, a more senior guest arrived late to the party, someone would be asked by the host to move to a lower status seat, in order to make way for them. This wasn't a cascading shift where everyone moves down one place. If the host told you to move, you had to go to the only place available, probably the lowest. For a society entrenched in hierarchy, rank and status, this could only be a humiliating experience.

Jesus, inspired by a couple of verses from the book of Proverbs, urges humility in such social circumstances. It is far better, he says, to take the most lowly place and be invited higher, than to insist on the higher place and be sent lower; and I think few of us would argue that point. Even though our society is in many ways much more egalitarian, and even allows women, yes women indeed, into the

highest positions of honour, we can still imagine how it would feel to be told we have gotten above our station and must withdraw to a more humble place.

Because this teaching is given in the context of the seating order at a meal, it may be tempting to limit its application to where we sit in church, or whether we consider ourselves worthy to do a reading or offer the prayers, or be on the PCC, or become churchwarden, or offer ourselves for ministry.

Indeed, I remember how much these verses affected my own sense of calling to ordination. Thirteen years ago, about one week after starting to attend church for the first time in many years, I suddenly felt a desire to be the person leading the service. When I told this to the vicar, he said, think about it for 6 months and then we'll see. In that six months I convinced myself I had been far too arrogant in wanting to be up front, and so I decided to 'take the lowest place' and become a nun instead, because no one could accuse a nun of doing it for the social status.

Ironically, within many convents, hierarchy is still very much alive and well in its own way. Until quite recently, novice nuns in the community at West Malling that I joined, had not even been allowed to speak to professed sisters who had taken their vows, nor did they spend any recreation time with them, nor were they allowed into the community library, or even into the art room. Moreover, and they still do this even today, every sister lines up to receive Holy Communion in strict community order – that is the order in which they joined the community. If another nun visited from a different community, they would be discretely asked their joining date, so they could be slotted into the hierarchy correctly. The same rule followed in the refectory, determining who sat where and who received their meals first and last.

One might think that these convent rules are a terrible breach of Jesus' direct teaching that the first shall be last and the last shall be first, but in some ways it is a reversal of what might naturally be the case, which is that those coming into

a community from higher social rank or with more wealth, or even with greater wisdom or educational training, would naturally take a higher place in any social group. Defining hierarchy based instead solely on 'time served', rendered all other forms of social status meaningless. A nun from a poor and humble background would be forever ranked superior to a nun from a royal family if she had entered the convent just one single day sooner.

This teaching of Jesus, then, is not just about where we sit at social gatherings, or even what leadership roles we aspire to or humbly resist, but about challenging all our unspoken assumptions about social standing and community inclusion, whether based on ethnicity, gender, ability or disability, upbringing, education, career, friendship group, place of birth, or parentage.

Jesus doesn't directly try to eliminate these hierarchies, but he does challenge us to be aware of them, and their inherent selfishness, and our own desire for public validation, and our temptation to enjoy withholding approval from others we think less worthy.

There is a danger here, and I think it's really important to pay attention to this, that the people who are already humble or already forced to take the lowest place in any gathering, will be the ones made most anxious by the gospel reading. I have heard it said anecdotally, that when a church makes a request for increased financial support, it is often the least well off who are most deeply upset that they cannot give what they feel they ought. And I have often found that when I preach, those whom I want desperately to hear a word of grace, of welcome, of forgiveness, they are the ones who somehow hear instead themselves being criticised, while those who might benefit from hearing a little criticism, hear only nice words of comfort.

Jesus promises blessings for those who humble themselves, and humiliation for those who big themselves up, but if you find yourself competing for the lowest

spot, hoping to win the prize for the most humble person of all, I'm afraid you may as well have just come in and grabbed the place of honour.

So, there's nothing inherently arrogant or humble about where you sit, or the sort of volunteering you do in the community, it's the attitude with which you do it that counts. If you were to sit at the back or play down your role or calling, simply because you want the affirmation and validation of someone else praising you and asking you to come up higher, it's no different to arrogantly assuming you deserve the best seats and highest privileges right from the start.

The truly humble person doesn't seek the place of honour, but neither do they seek the lowest place in order to be even more greatly honoured. It sounds like we can't win! But a few years ago, one of those very hierarchical nuns told me her solution to this conundrum. She said, 'the humble person doesn't think of themselves as better than they are, nor do they think of themselves as worse than they are; *instead, they do not think of themselves at all, but they pay attention only to the needs of others, and to Christ, and they fall in love with him, and they forget themselves entirely.*'