

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.*

Our reading today from the Epistle to the Hebrews sets the stage (or the table) for the gospel reading. The Epistle was originally attributed to Paul, but it's likely a more learned Greek speaking writer. It was probably written for Jewish Christians living in Jerusalem. The second sentence of the reading is, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,” which stresses the importance of hospitality in Jewish society.

In fact, there is a very long history of the importance of hospitality and of eating a meal, in the ancient world, and a person's choice of guests. Famine was never far away, and food was often scarce, so eating a meal was of great significance, and being invited to eat with others, a very important event.

In our gospel reading Jesus is invited to dine with “one of the rulers of the Pharisees.” Really? That's a bit of a surprise. The Pharisees in general did not have much love for Jesus – he was forever disturbing their peace and questioning the law, often breaking it. So, we can ask two questions. First, why was Jesus invited, and why did he accept the invitation?

There are several possibilities as to why Jesus was invited to the meal. It may be simply that Jesus and the leader were friends, or at least well known to each other. Jesus was often invited by their leaders to speak in synagogues in the many towns he travelled to. And once we remove the negative impressions we have of this formidable group of Pharisees, and recognize their influence on many people during the first century, we should not be surprised by this encounter. Just a few verses earlier some Pharisees actually assisted Jesus by informing him of Herod's plans to locate Jesus (cf. 13:31). This suggests a more neutral relationship between “the Pharisees” and Jesus in Luke's Gospel.

It has also been suggested that it was social necessity – the host didn't really want to invite him but given his current popularity, etiquette demanded that they not snub this new rabbi. More darkly, it may also have been possible that they were setting Jesus up. We are told, after all, that “they had him (Jesus) under close scrutiny” (Luke 14:1).

We might also ask why Jesus would accept such an invitation. First, if the leader is a friend, why not accept? And Jesus is obviously not intimidated by those in power, and he extends his ministry to include them. Also, Jesus may see this as an opportunity. Using it as a teaching moment for the invited group.

Luke says that Jesus had noticed that when the guests arrived, they invariably chose the best places at table. So, Jesus turns to his favourite teaching form, the parable. And Jesus now does what he often does, he calls out the guests' behaviour. They all act as though they are most important, and rush to sit in the best place, next to the host. Jesus points out that if they choose the best place at table, they may face humiliation if “someone more distinguished than you” has been invited, and when they arrive, the host of the feast may come to you and tell you to get out of the best seat and go down to the lower end of the table. How much shame you will feel! Instead, Jesus says, “go recline at the last place,” and then when the host sees you there, he may say, “My friend! Come up to a higher place!” Think of the honour you will experience when all the guests see you move up higher (Luke 14:7-10). When Jesus suggests they should be more careful about their choice of seating, he is reminding them of the common rules of behaviour in Roman culture, that involve honour and shame.

But actually, Jesus is not saying anything new, even in the Jewish rules of behaviour. Proverbs 25:6-7 gives almost the same advice. We read:

<sup>6</sup>Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence  
or stand in the place of the great,  
<sup>7</sup>for it is better to be told, “Come up here,”  
than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.

All those present at the feast would therefore recognize this advice, find it wise, and may even act on its wisdom. But Jesus' next words turn the entire episode in a decidedly uncomfortable direction. “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Luke 14:11). No longer are we talking about the codes of honour and shame, but instead Jesus addresses the problem of anyone seeking to be better, or higher up in the pecking order than others. That must be avoided, he says, so that God may be the source of humbling and exaltation, not humans; it's God's action. Trying to gain respect in the eyes of other guests is not the way to act at table.

Jesus continues to describe what should happen at a feast. And isn't what's expected in Roman society, where a host invited guests to a feast who were his friends, family or those with power. The idea was that a guest would then return the favour and invite him back. The principle of reciprocity was an essential way for reinforcing social bonds and displaying power, rather than just providing a lavish meal. Hosts demonstrated generosity through lavish meals, while guests reciprocated by their continued support for the patron.

Jesus challenges this norm. He says, anyone can invite “friends, brothers, family, or rich neighbors” to dinner, because one may expect, or even deserve, a return invitation. Why not instead invite “the poor, the handicapped, the lame, the blind.” Then “you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid in the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14:12-14). This is kingdom talk; this is how society will work when God rules in life. This is the gospel of Jesus the Messiah. Rewards come from God alone, and God's rewards hardly ever resemble the rewards given and expected by the world.

The meal at the Pharisee's house has become a stage for the preaching of the gospel, a gospel that seeks to turn the world upside-down.

AMEN