

Sermon 1'9'19 *Ecclesiasticus 10: 12-18; Luke 14: 1 & 7-14; Hebrews 13: 1-8 & 15-16*

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May I speak in the name of the one true God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen †

Intro

When our three children were growing up, we always had our evening meal together. It was a chance to be together, talk about the day, share jokes and stories (*and* hopefully instil a few table manners!). We found it was important that everyone always sat in the same place. Not only could we keep the boys apart (so they couldn't prod each other), it also prevented squabbles over who would sit where.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus has been invited to the house of a leader of the *Pharisees*, to share a Sabbath meal with a group of them. He notices how they're preoccupied with getting the best seats.

Part 2

Pharisees were widely respected for their piety. At a time when the Jewish faith had been undermined by centuries of foreign invasions, and people often hedged their bets by following pagan superstitions, the *Pharisees* saw themselves as *guardians* of their nation's religious identity.

They taught that the way to God was through obeying the '*rules*' – not just the Ten Commandments, but rules about what you could / couldn't eat, what you could / couldn't do on the Sabbath, who you could / couldn't associate with, and so on.

They separated themselves from the rest of society to study the scriptures and teach God's law (the word 'Pharisee' means 'separated one'). And they regarded themselves as *superior* - they weren't *wholly* bad, but they were certainly *proud*.

Jesus keeps coming into *conflict* with them. That seems inevitable: after all, here's this 'nobody' (a carpenter if you please!) from a remote rural province, without formal training, yet who speaks with such authority, shows such a grasp of the scriptures, performs remarkable acts of healing (which he often tries to keep secret), and speaks of his own closeness to Almighty God in startlingly intimate terms – who attracts followers wherever he goes, who scandalises *respectable* middle-class folk by the kind of people he mixes with, and who's not afraid to challenge the Pharisees themselves – (and always seems to get the better of any argument with them).

Why then had they invited him? They *may* have been hoping to *overawe* this country bumpkin. But undoubtedly, they were *worried* about him (and puzzled), wondering what he would do or say next,

and maybe hoping catch him out so they might discredit him (or even have him arrested for blasphemy).

[Part 3](#)

Luke tells us they were *watching him* closely - but Jesus is watching *them* too! And, far from being over-awed, it's *he* who wrong-foots *them*!

Seeing how they jostle for the most prestigious seats, Jesus takes the opportunity to tell them what Luke calls a '*parable*' (they must be *dumbfounded* by his *cheek!*). It *looks* more like a piece of advice about how to avoid embarrassment - but since Luke calls it a '*parable*' we can be sure it has a *deeper* meaning. So what's Jesus *really* talking about?

Well, as Tom reminds us, when reading the Bible we always need to think about the *context*. And the rest of Luke's chapter shows that Jesus is *really* talking about the way some people (especially Pharisees) were always jostling for a good position in *God's sight* – trying to show how well *they* followed the rules, whilst watching out for *lapses* by other people. They've just criticised Jesus for healing a disabled man who happened to be present because he did so on the Sabbath.

At one level, Jesus' parable *is* a warning about the way selfish *pride* can lead to *social humiliation*. But it's *really* a warning about pushing yourself forward in the sight of *God* by assuming that you're somehow better, and more deserving, than others.

[Part 4](#)

In Jesus' time it was easy for well-off, well-educated people to persuade themselves they were somehow superior in *God's sight* to less fortunate folk who lacked their advantages. [Maybe that's a temptation that's *still* with us - perhaps *we* might do well to reflect on this, especially in the Church of England, which is so often associated with 'respectability'?)

But at the time Luke was writing, the end of the 1st century, there was another obvious relevance to Jesus' parable. Huge numbers of *non-Jews* had become Christians – they'd entered what might be considered the '*dinner party*' prepared by the God worshipped by the Jewish ancestors (Abraham, Moses, David). Many *Jewish* Christians found this difficult. They thought of *themselves* as God's '*chosen people*' - forgetting God's words to Abraham, '*through you ALL the families of the earth will be blessed*'. They had difficulty grasping God's great design to turn *the world of human values* (dominated by PRIDE) on its head.

[Part 5](#)

But it's a theme that runs throughout the Old and New Testaments.

What the ancient *pagan* world valued was *Power* and *Success*: the weak and the humble were regarded with contempt. I think we might consider how far that *continues* to be evident today(!)

Pride is *always* with us; and there are some very *ugly* manifestations of it in the modern world. We might reflect on how many of the problems that beset our world, and threaten our well-being, have ultimately come about as a result of people's PRIDE.

Our Old Testament reading contains a dire warning against Pride: "*The beginning of human **pride** is to forsake the Lord – (the heart has withdrawn from its **maker**)*". But God's values are different, Ecclesiasticus reminds us: "*the Lord overthrows the thrones of rulers, and enthrones the lowly in their place*".

Whilst reading this, two things sprang into my mind:

One was Shelley's famous poem '*Ozymandias*', a powerful reflection on the inevitable fate of human pride. Here's an extract (slightly modified):

"I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said:—Two vast and trunk-less legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shatter'd face lies, [.....].

And on the pedestal these words appear:

*"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"*

Yet *nothing* else remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

So much for *Ozymandias*' pride and power (whoever he was)!

The second thing that came into my mind was those beautiful words of Mary in the *first* chapter of Luke – Mary, soon to become the mother of Jesus, a humble teenage girl in rural Galilee, with every reason to be terrified at the prospect of becoming an unmarried mother in those days in a strongly patriarchal society – yet her *faith* sustains her:

*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour;
for he has looked with favour on his lowly servant.*

*From this day all generations will call me blessed: the Almighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his Name.*

He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation.

He has shown the strength of his arm, he has scattered the proud in their conceit.

He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

CONCLUSION

God's values are *not* the values of *this* world – the values of “*me first!*”, rooted in selfish pride and self-love.

Human pride has been likened to a great *cloud* that blots out the sun of God's loving generosity. If someone believes (as those Pharisees seemed to) that they *deserve* to be favoured by God, because of what they've *done*, or because of who they *are*, then they're effectively saying that *they don't need* God's *grace*, God's *mercy* - they're *also* implying that *other* people who *don't deserve* it shouldn't *have* it. And let's be *honest*, don't *all* of us (in our heart of hearts) sometimes find ourselves feeling this way as we look at the world around us?

But *Jesus* spent the whole of his ministry *breaking through* that cloud, and bringing the healing sunshine of *God's* love (his wholly *unearned* love) to all those in its shadow. And all of *us*, who place our trust in *Jesus*, are *called* to *put aside* the small-mindedness that tries to push itself forward and leave others behind.

As the eminent Christian writer C.S.Lewis (author of the *Narnia* books) wrote: “I believe in Christianity just as I believe that the sun has risen, not just because I *see it*, but because *by* it I see everything else”.

As we go through the coming week, let's remember those words of the Letter to the Hebrews, which we heard earlier:

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever”.

[.....]

“Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God ...

.... Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God”.

Amen †