

Luke 14:1,7-14 – “Life-Giving Humbleness” – Aug 29/10

Well, I think I can say – with some sadness – that the summer vacation time is drawing to a close. It’s been an interesting summer, especially trying to get our ‘new’ old boat running properly. While the three weeks that I took to go up to Savary Island didn’t quite go as planned, and despite fishing in the greatest sockeye salmon run in a hundred years and not catching a single fish, still we’ve had some great times. Many, if not most of those good times involved food. We’ve discovered a delightful restaurant at the marina in Secret Cove called “The Upper Deck” which offers not only a wondrous view of the cove and all the boating activity but also a superb prawn linguini!

There are, surprisingly to me at least, some really fine dining experiences up the Sunshine Coast. A few years ago I passed on the lamb chops, thinking that the place we were staying at (“Lord Jim’s”, although it has changed hands and has a new name) would not be the best place for lamb, expecting perhaps some frozen chops brutally microwaved and dumped on a cold plate. However, my wife Elizabeth can’t resist lamb, and so she tried the chops ... and they were perhaps the best lamb chops ever eaten. We enquired, and discovered that the chef was a full five-star, blue-ribbon chef with years of experience in Paris and other world centres and who had given up the urban rat race to live on the Sunshine Coast. Wow!

This year we tried another delightful place called “The Laughing Oyster.” It’s a bit “out of the way.” You can reach this restaurant by boat from Desolation Sound into Okeover Arm (and there is no shortage of multi-million dollar yachts that do so), or you can take the road as far up the Sunshine Coast as it goes, and then a little bit further past Lund and over the hill. Again, another five-star dining experience, with utterly superb food and the very best in service. The staff were the very definition of “the gracious host” and with every move, every gesture we were made to feel as if we were the guests of honour, even with other diners present. It would be so easy to be seduced by that kind of lifestyle and treatment, and so easy to start expecting to be treated that way all the time, and so easy to become utterly obnoxious as a result.

Not every dining adventure this summer has been a delight. By way of contrast we’ve stopped into other roadside eateries this summer. We haven’t had a truly dreadful experience, but still sometimes we were left with a strong sense of being if not unwanted guests then at the very least guests who were only being barely tolerated. It was a hugely uncomfortable feeling, a feeling that pretty much guarantees I won’t stop there again.

Now, I’m sorry if all of this talk about food just before lunch has you drooling, because our gospel reading for this morning also relates to food. Many of you will be familiar with this reading, or at least with the first part of it. Jesus – watching people gathering for a meal at the house of a leader of the Pharisees – is moved by their behaviour to tell them a parable in two parts. The first part is to the guests, obviously triggered by a scramble for the most important seats at the table, and the second part is to hosts, perhaps less obviously triggered by seeing who was doing the scrambling.

It’s easy to imagine that first scene, isn’t it? Easy, perhaps, because we’ve all seen such behaviour – of course, we all will enthusiastically deny that we have been ever been involved in jostling for positions of honour. Indeed, the desire by Christians not to be seen as scrambling for positions of honour has turned so far the opposite direction that it has become almost a mirror image of what Jesus was describing. I don’t mean only the revered custom of the rearmost seats in the Sanctuary as being the seats of honour, although that does tend to be one example of how Jesus’ teaching has been turned upside-down. From this parable come to mind some wondrously bizarre images of Christians all scrambling for the seats at the bottom of the table, all with faces expectantly turned toward the host eagerly (but oh-ever-so-politely) making “pick me, Jesus” faces, hoping to be chosen as one of the more important and asked to move up the table.

Of course we recognize that Jesus was talking about more than just a scramble for seats at the table, that he was talking about more than just good etiquette, good manners. By setting these instructions into a parable Jesus signaled to the people at that supper, and to us, that he was talking in much broader terms. Jesus was pointing out how actions reveal the real values that people hold, as contrasted to the values they profess – in a sense “you are defined by what you do, not by what you say you believe.” Now that’s uncomfortable, isn’t it? It’s bad enough to be embarrassed in public by being asked to move down to your proper place, but to understand that Jesus is talking about being reprimanded by God for assuming a greater self-worth than is appropriate makes us very, very uncomfortable. It’s easy to see how Christians who pay attention to this message can so easily move to adopt a self-effacing style of behaviour, humbling themselves in the hope of being called to move forward to a more prominent place in the kingdom. They focus upon Jesus’ summary of the first part of his teaching, “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” and try to follow that principle.

It would seem at first glance that this is an easy formula for a way to be exalted ... simply humble yourself. Sounds easy if you say it fast, “know your place - humble yourself.” But there’s a danger here, a dangerous trap of putting on a highly public “I am not worthy, Lord” cloak of humility, failing to grasp that the very public nature of the cloak defeats the whole purpose of being humble. One of the examples of this that often gives me pause is the use of the word ‘just’ in public prayer ... “Lord, we just ask that you would ...” as if we are so insignificantly humble that we feel we shouldn’t even be bothering God with our petitions, and we don’t want to ask too much.

Jesus was aware of that trap, and was careful to add some instruction on just what he meant by being humble. Unfortunately, many faithful Christians fail to continue reading and miss hearing that instruction that forms the second part of the parable. That second part is directed to “the one who had invited him” – “who had invited him.” How much clearer can the signal be that this message is to those who have invited Christ into their lives? – and is directed to the faithful, to us, laying out and defining exactly what it means to humble yourself.

What was that definition? “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, don’t invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours ... [instead,] invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” Ahhh, now there’s a definition of true humility. Not gathering together to look piously humble – or is it humbly pious? – but with sincere deeds and actions all done without any expectation of reward except in heaven. Thanks be to God that there are many, many faithful Christians who have heard this instruction, who have listened to the second part, and who live out their faith in just this way, offering themselves in quiet service.

I keep coming back to use the term “second part” of this teaching because I think it’s vitally important to recognize that we have a dual role in our faith. All of us understand our role as guests at the great feast and banquet provided by Christ in his body and his blood – that Holy Communion is at the heart and foundation of our faith. But we need to understand that we are also hosts. We are called by Christ to invite others to this banquet on his behalf. We are not merely the guests addressed in the first part, we are the hosts addressed in the second part, and we need to understand that how we fulfill our role as hosts defines the nature of the humility we adopt in our role as guests. The key to the definition of our life-giving humbling ourselves lies in the nature of the invitation we offer to others.

Now that puts an understanding on this passage that is somewhat different from the common understanding today, doesn’t it? Far removed from the practicing of “I am not worthy”

or even worse “I am more not-worthy than you” in selected gatherings of friends, relatives, and others in the congregation is this understanding that we will find ultimate exaltation from Christ in offering invitations to come join us at his table to those who have no way to repay us. Just as there is no way that we can repay God for his gift of grace and mercy in Christ Jesus and yet we are invited to his table, we are expected in turn to freely invite others to the same table. We are not called to do it for recognition, or glory, or pats on the back, or congratulations, even though those feel awful good. Any gratitude for doing so is to God, not us.

We are guests at the Lord’s Table, but we are hosts also. We need to know that our place is here – and to help others know their place is here also. We don’t need to pretend this is a five-star restaurant and wear fancy waiter’s tails and morning coats or become all gushing and gooey. The banquet to which we are honoured to invite people in Christ’s name is the ultimate dining experience because of God’s grace. All that we are called to do is to ensure that everyone who visits or attends here feels welcome, feels special, and feels like a wanted guest. All we need do is humbly say, “Welcome, friend ... we’re glad you’ve come ... here, have a good seat ... join us at this heavenly feast!”