

Luke 14:1,7-14 – “Invitations” – Aug 29/04

Well, the days sure go by faster when you're on vacation than they do when you're working, don't they? But I am pleased to say that it was a mostly great time. I say 'mostly' because there was a period of house renovation in there that took more time than I thought it would, but the results sure look nice.

At the other end of the scale, and the highlight of our vacation, was a short trip to Jasper to wrap it up. We stayed a couple of nights at the famous Jasper Park Lodge, and it was magnificent. Pampered from the moment we arrived, treated like honoured guests, it was delightful. The first night we were there we ate in the main sitting area – a huge room, lots of wood, a fireplace crackling away over on one wall, and an assortment of coffee tables surrounded by couches and chairs made from small branches. It was all terribly elegant, and we had a wonderful supper. The second night's supper, however, was the ultimate. I had managed to book online a reservation in the Edith Cavell Room, and the moment we arrived there for supper we began a dining experience to remember forever (and I'm sure I will never forget the price!) Now in my previous career in the mining industry I did a fair amount of travel, and I've eaten in some of the fancier hotels in the world, and dining in the Edith Cavell Room is right at the top of the list. Probably because of our early reservation we scored a window table, possibly the best window table, and so had a magnificent view. It seemed as if we were the guests of honour, or at least certainly felt that way. 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.

But there was another 'meal' experience we had that was not so pleasant, and the contrast between the two experiences came immediately to my mind when I reread the gospel passage from Luke. This other experience was a funeral mass for a friend's mother, held in a Roman Catholic Church in North Vancouver. While there was no explicit prohibition against taking communion, neither was there an invitation to participate, and in fact their system is set up so that if you're not familiar with it, you miss the opportunity to participate by failing to pick up the host wafer on the way in. I felt a strong sense of being if not an unwanted guest then at the very least a guest who was only being barely tolerated, and it was a hugely uncomfortable feeling, a feeling that would certainly guarantee that I would not be back unless to support another close friend.

Many of us are familiar with our gospel reading for this morning, or at least with the first part of it. Jesus, observing the behaviour of people gathering for a meal at the house of a leader of the Pharisees, was moved by their behaviour to tell them a parable in two parts. The first was 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 what the scene looked like, isn't it? Easy, perhaps, because we've all seen such behaviour – I hesitate to get you to agree that you might even have participated in such behaviour, because just about everyone will enthusiastically deny that they have been involved in such a scramble. Indeed, the desire to be seen by Christians as not scrambling for the 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 just the 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, and does bring to mind some wondrously bizarre images of Christians all scrambling for the seats at the bottom of the table, but all with faces expectantly turned toward the host eagerly (but ever-so-politely) making "pick me" faces, hoping to be chosen as one of the more important.

We should 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 his instruction

into a parable Jesus signaled the people at that supper, and us, that he was talking in much broader terms. What Jesus was trying to point out was attitudes, values, underlying motivations, and how actions signal the real values that people hold, as contrasted to the values they profess. Now that's uncomfortable, isn't it? Bad enough to be embarrassed at a table by being asked to move down to your proper place, but when we begin to understand that what Jesus is talking about is about being reprimanded by God for assuming a greater self-worth than is appropriate we begin to get very, very uncomfortable. It's easy to see how Christians who pay attention to this message (present company excluded, of course!) 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.

But this is where all of the heavenly bells should start ringing – not the lovely ding-dong caroling bells of celebration that a humble, self-effacing Christian has been promoted to a place of greater honour, but the harsh clanging alarm bells that signal that the words, the message, the meaning of Christ's words have been misheard, misunderstood, misappropriated and misused. Jesus begins to sound the alarm with a harsh summary of the first part of his teaching, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted". The harsh klaxon alarm horns should be going "braaack, braaack, braaack" full tilt here, for there is a dangerous trap. 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, "humble yourself".

And how many Christians have fallen into that trap? How many still do? Huge numbers of Christians today put 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 purpose.

Jesus was aware of that trap, and was careful to add some instruction on how to avoid it. Unfortunately, many faithful Christians fail to continue reading, or listening, or 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 us, laying out and defining exactly what it means to humble yourself. And 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 humble, but with sincere deeds and actions all done without any expectation of reward except in heaven. And thanks be to God that there are many, many faithful Christians who have heard the warning, who have listened to the second part, and who live out their faith in just this way, offering themselves in quiet service.

As individuals we can learn from this teaching of Jesus, and come to understand that he calls us to a faith of quiet, humble service to others. I believe that one-on-one we would be horrified to think that we are acting in such a way as to offend Jesus, and cause him to ask us to move to a place of lesser honour. But I think it's much easier for us, and by 'us' here I mean both Christians as a group and Central as a congregation, to adopt patterns of behaviour that reflect a false modesty rather than a true humility. I think back to my negative experience at the funeral mass, and how in the midst of people professing and practicing their faith I felt so subtly yet so clearly only partially welcome, and I wonder if we do the same thing to those who visit here.

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 the 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 humbling ourselves lies in the nature of the invitations 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 more not worthy than you" in selected gatherings of friends, relatives, and others in the congregation who would echo "yes, you are more not worthy" (and truly mean it – in a 'mean' way), 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, 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.

If we are listening to this scripture, really listening, and hearing both parts, I think we will be clear that our role, our responsibility is to send out the invitations, to invite others to join us at the table. I believe this year will be the time for us to become a bit more active in response to that responsibility, to reach out to the people around us, neighbours yet strangers, to intentionally invite them to share with us the feast of redemption provided by God in Christ. I believe we can be sensitive to our guests and to make them feel welcome, to provide for them the Jasper Park Lodge kind of experience that makes them feel noticed (in a good way), welcome and wanting to come back, as opposed to the funeral mass kind of experience that left me feeling a bit glad that I wasn't discovered as some kind of trespasser.

We are guests at the Lord's Table, but we are hosts also. It is time to start writing up and sending out the invitations, to say in all humility, "Come, join us at this heavenly feast".