

THE EMMAUS SERIES

22nd Sunday Year C

Ecclesiasticus 3:17-20; 28-29

Hebrews 12:18-19; 22-24

Luke 14:1, 7-14

The one who humbles himself will be exalted

Jesus was sometimes invited to a meal by those who were curious to hear him. They were sometimes unfriendly to him we know from the gospel accounts. But most of his hosts were probably motivated by curiosity to hear what this teacher who was making such a stir had to say. This reconstruction of one such meal by Luke shows the Saviour's skills as a teacher; and the kind of challenge he brought to those who were leaders in the community. Those at table with are 'watching him closely'; he knows that he is expected to entertain them with his table talk.

He uses as his starting point what has been taking place as the guests assembled. To our modern ears, it all seems rather stilted; but the scene described by Jesus was familiar to his listeners, and taken for granted by them, as the customary way to behave in a culture with rules of status and precedence that were very complex – determined by such things as age, learning, public standing and wealth. This situation provides the material of a parable that invites his listeners to see beyond these old conventions. He who is happy to make himself the servant of all and urges his followers to do the same knows how important the openness and generosity of true humility will be in the life of his disciples when his mission has been accomplished in Jerusalem – for 'God opposes the proud but gives his blessings to the humble' (James 4:6). There is a lesson here for every Christian community: the quality of the relationships that make up a community will be the measure of the blessings they receive, and the effectiveness of their missionary outreach.

But Jesus has a deeper lesson to give. He uses the rapport he has established with his audience to speak to them of the revolutionary ways of God, the main burden of his preaching. 'When someone invites you to a wedding feast', he begins – not wanting to offend them by making too obvious reference to the behaviour he has observed; but also, probably, pointing to the messianic theme he will take up later, after one of the guests has commented, 'Blessed is anyone who will share the meal in the kingdom of God'. His reference to seeking the 'place of honour' is an echo of his criticism of the Pharisees for liking 'to take the seats of honour at the synagogue' (Lk 11:43). His story of 'invited guests' probably also challenges the presumption of the 'leading Pharisees' that their strict observance marked them out as the 'elect', or chosen ones, of God, certain to take part in the messianic feast. This is backed up by the parable to which we have made reference that follows on from today's reading. It tells of the guests who do not accept their invitation to the banquet, and are replaced by 'the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame'. In today's reading, Jesus has already startled his listeners by saying that God will bless those who invite these very ones to their table. These interpreters of the Law, he knows, forbade entrance to the temple to the lame and the blind.

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