

22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time: Banquet Etiquette at the Table of the Lord.

Today's Gospel contains two teachings of similar styles. Both are about banquets. "When you go to a banquet" and "When you give a banquet." Both have a cautioning phrase, "Don't sit at a high place, lest you be put down," and "Don't put out a spread for the rich to impress them, lest you already receive your reward." Both have the teaching, "But when..."

The Lord is not playing Miss Manners. He's not giving lessons in proper etiquette. He is teaching us the proper way to view ourselves and others. He is teaching us about honor, respect, and, particularly, about humility.

A number of years ago there was a terrible article in T.V. Guide entitled "You are where you sit." Part of it is as follows:

"In Hollywood you are where you sit. This is called power seating. A strategically placed table indicates to the community your prominent and important position in the industry. It is so important that one major studio assigns a full time PR person to make sure the studio doesn't play second fiddle to anyone. One television producer has his secretary call before a meal and politely note that if the table isn't in the right place, her boss won't go. One producer put it this way, 'Information is power. I don't want to be seen seated with two dentists and three veterinarians. It ruins my image, and they have nothing to offer me.'" Obviously, humility was not that producer's forte. His place at table had to signify his importance, his superiority over others.

The Banquet table in the first part of the Gospel is the Table of the Lord. We are invited to the celebration of God's Kingdom. Our joy should be that we are invited to this meal. We cannot be concerned with comparing ourselves to the other guests. We are told that we shouldn't think so highly of ourselves that we put ourselves over other people. Symbolically, we shouldn't move to the best seat at the banquet thinking that we are so much better than everyone else.

Are we better than others because we are here at Mass right now and others are not planning on worshipping this weekend? Is that how the Lord wants us to think? Of course not.

A number of years ago I was speaking with a young lady, in her first years of college. She had been very involved in high school ministry and used to give some of the best talks and the most spiritual sharing. She was holy, but, sometimes, a bit pietistic. Whether she meant it or not, she conveyed a bit of a "better than thou" attitude. She wanted to talk to me because she wanted to start a separate prayer group for those, and these were her words, "who were "really up there spiritually speaking." I left the discussion thinking, "How can she possibly think that she was spiritually superior to someone else?" She, evidently, thought that she deserved a higher place at the Table of the Lord. Unfortunately, she soon found herself outside of the banquet altogether when she became infatuated and chose to become sexually

active outside of marriage.

I, and I am sure you, run into many people who assert their high spirituality, greater than all others, save those who share their particular experiences. They are part of a particular prayer movement or a spiritual group, or they have visited shrines, they join a traditionalist parish and consider themselves the “faithful Catholics” as in real Catholics opposed to the rest of us. They insinuate, or even say directly: “I’m sorry that you haven’t made this movement, joined this group or visited that shrine. You are really missing out here.” And in this way purport to be so much better than everyone else. What they are in fact saying is, “You haven’t made this movement, you haven’t visited this shrine, well, you’re just not up there, spiritually.” A truly holy person would never belittle the faith-life of another person. The first dinner instruction encourages us to recognize who we are before the Lord, not to be concerned with making believe we are better than others.

The second part of the gospel does not speak about the Table of the Lord, but refers to honoring people for favors to come later.

During my senior year of college I was invited to a meal that I was surprised to find out was in my honor. It was put on by the parents of one of the Freshmen that I was assigned to supervise by my college-seminary. This individual was not studying to be a priest, but was living with the seminary students and was expected to follow their routine. It turns out that his parents owned a very good restaurant in New York City. You would not believe this meal they had ready. The table was stacked high with filet mignons. During the meal his parents kept telling me that they were happy I was supervising their son. They were more lavish in their praises of me than in the food they offered me. I left feeling pretty good about myself. After all, I had to agree with some of it.

About a week later, the young man mentioned to me that when I assign chores for the Freshmen for the next month, he really didn’t want to do anything that would take too long or would be too difficult. I ignored this and gave him whatever job he was in line for. His parents never spoke to me again.

I was not being honored, I was being used.

The second dinner instruction, about not looking for pay-backs, tells us to be sincere. The Christian attitude should be to care genuinely for others, not try to buy them. If we are concerned with whom they are, not what they can do for us, then we are honoring the Lord who is present within them.

Put both dinner instructions together and we have, simply enough: recognize the presence of the Lord in ourselves and in others and honor that presence. This is Christian humility. Humility is rejoicing in whom we are and who others are before the Lord. If we live this way then we, the humble, will be exalted by the Lord.

From the Book of the Prophet Micah, chapter 6 verse 8: *He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God?*