

## Homily for the 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time Year C

By Fr Steele Hartmann

‘Now on a Sabbath day he had gone for a meal to the house of one of the leading Pharisees.’ (Luke 14:1) In Jesus’ day, meals were an important part of the social world because meals affirmed and gave legitimacy to a person’s role and status. Meals were attended by people of the same social rank. To have been invited to dine in the house of one of the leading Pharisees, Jesus must clearly have been seen to be their social equal. Accepting an invitation to dinner obliged a guest to return the favour. It was not uncommon, therefore, for a person to decline an invitation, especially if they realised that returning the favour was more than they could or care to handle. Inviting those who cannot return the favour was viewed as social suicide. Such guests were clearly people of a lower social status than the host. To associate with them was to dishonour one’s own social status. One’s social equals, then, would shun any further invitations, and so the host would be socially ruined. In this context, Jesus’ words would have been quite shocking: “When you give a lunch or a dinner, do not ask your brothers, relations or rich neighbours, for fear they will repay your courtesy by inviting you in return. No, when you have a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.” (Luke 14:12-13)

‘Jesus then told the guests a parable.’ (Luke 14:7) The story Jesus tells seems to be a piece of advice on how to behave at a dinner party so as to avoid embarrassment. But being a parable it is not a piece of worldly wisdom. Rather it is about our relationship with God. This morning’s Gospel passage does not go on to report the further conversation that occurred at this meal in the house of the Pharisee. In response to Jesus’ appalling social gaff, one of those at table says to him, “Happy the one who will be at the feast in the Kingdom of God!” (Luke 14:15) — a reference to another meal: this time the eternal banquet. Pharisees believed in the Resurrection, which was not a universally held belief at that time. Pharisees were good and pious people. They scrupulously kept the Law and were highly respected for it. Because of this they confidently expected to be raised up on the Last Day and in the General Judgement to be rewarded for it by taking their place at the eternal banquet table. At this banquet there would be no sinners — that is, no crippled, no blind, no lame, no poor, for all these misfortunes were seen in Jesus’ day to be the consequence, the manifestation, of sin. (e.g. see John 9:2) Thus, in saying to Jesus, “Happy the one who will be at the feast in the Kingdom of God!” no doubt another trap was being set for Jesus (see Luke 14:1), perhaps inviting him to go on and comment on God’s behaviour in not inviting any of these unfortunates to the eternal banquet either.

In response Jesus tells them another parable of another meal, about a man who held a great banquet but to which those invited refused to attend: “I have brought a piece of land and must go to inspect it. Please accept my apologies”; “I have brought five yolk of oxen and am on my way to try them out. Please accept my apologies”; “I have just got married and so am unable to come.” (Luke 14:18-19) In Matthew’s version of this story the man is a King (Matthew 22:2), and so the refusal could be understood in terms of their feeling unable to return the invitation of such a great man. Here their refusal may be seen as a snub to one they consider their social inferior. Thus, when his servant inform him of their refusals, we are told, ‘Then the householder, in a rage, said to his servants, “Go out quickly into the street and the

alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. ... because, I tell you, not one of those who were invited shall have a taste of my banquet.” (Luke 14:21,24) What Jesus is telling the Pharisees here he puts more bluntly to them elsewhere: “I tell you solemnly, tax collectors and prostitutes are making their way into the Kingdom of heaven ahead of you.” (Matthew 21:31) These are those who in turning from their sinful ways accept the invitation, though they know they are unworthy and are unable to return it (see Luke 7:29-30), for what Jesus is speaking of here is the eternal banquet in God’s Kingdom.

What Jesus is telling them here, and us, is that God is inviting everyone to the eternal banquet, the high and mighty AND the lowly. None are God’s equal. None are able to give a banquet worthy of God in return. None are worthy to be invited. Yet God invites us all. What Jesus is telling the Pharisees, and us, to do — “when you have a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind” — is what God himself is doing, for we are all unworthy sinners yet he invites all; we are all blind, lame or crippled in some way. In doing what God does we show ourselves to be God’s son/daughter, and, as Jesus tells us, the son’s place in the house is assured. (John 8:35ff) This is the way to secure our place at the eternal banquet, and not by clinging to human traditions that dictate with whom we might mix. (Mark 7:11) What Jesus is further telling us, here in this parable and also in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11ff), is that our refusal to go into the banquet (whether because we feel unworthy or whether because we feel those who are invited are not worthy of us) in no way stops the celebration: it goes on — and without us, if needs be!

Jesus, true Son of his Father, practiced what he preached: he ate and drank with sinners. The Pharisees did not — perhaps even, could not — understand, and so they would ask, “Why does your master eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” (Matthew 9:10; Luke 5:30; Mark 2:16) He did this to the end. At his Last Supper he said to those with him, “I have longed to eat this Passover with you ... And yet, here with me on the table is the hand of the one who betrays me.” To another at table with him he said, “By the time the cock crows today you will have denied three times that you know me. (Luke 22:15, 21, 34) To us he says, “Do this in memory of me.” (1 Corinthians 11:24-25) Each time we celebrate Eucharist, which is a meal, the sign and sacrament of the eternal banquet, Jesus commands us, “When you prepare a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.” We are to exclude none, but go to the streets and alleys and bring them all in, for this is what Jesus our Master did, and this is what God our Father does. For this we will find our place at the eternal banquet in the Kingdom of God. This being Refugee and Migrant Sunday, it is well that we be mindful that the invitation includes them! We must be able to find a place at table with us for them, too.