

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, 28 August 2022

Scriptures: Sirach 3:17-29; Hebrews 12:18-24; Luke 14:1, 7-14

Homily: Fr. Ken

The second reading, from the Letter to the Hebrews, is very much about helping people to discern what really matters in life, and to understand who they are as persons. The author of Hebrews says that we will come to understand those questions by celebrating with a community.

The reading invites us to glimpse ahead to the future, coming toward us from God. God has prepared a place for us, a festival in the holy city where everyone, and everything, is coming to perfection.

It is the fullness, a completeness, the joy of union with God and one another, for which we were created—something we have already, but just barely experienced, in very special moments of grace.

This is the sort of vision that freed Jesus to be just exactly who he was on earth, whether walking along the road, or praying quietly on a hillside, or at a dinner party.

In the Gospel passage, St. Luke narrates one of those dinner parties.

We might imagine Jesus feeling like some of today's partygoers: he would have felt unsure of what will be the most unpleasant experience: either the lukewarm food or those people who attend just to be seen.

In fact, we do not have a single story in the Gospels of any meal Jesus shared that did not involve some sort of contention. You may remember these lines:

“Why does he let her touch him?” “Why does he eat and drink with sinners?” “Why don’t they wash their hands?” “Martha, Martha, the company is more important than the menu”. And, finally, “The hand of the one who will betray me is with me at the table”.

But then, Jesus brought enough wit to each situation that even if breaking bread with him was rarely peaceful, it was never boring. Perhaps that describes not just his meals, but the process of conversion that they call forth.

Ostensibly, the scripture readings focus on humility, seemingly promoting it as a pragmatic approach even if it’s not a deeply felt conviction. The Gospel scene in which the guests try to appear distinguished while at the same time vying for prime seats is one that begs for a Mark Twain depiction.

Was Jesus acting like a frivolous talk-show host when he offered his suggestions for how the guests could ultimately get the recognition they craved, by pretending it did not matter? The problem there was that seating arrangements didn’t matter to Jesus, while others believed their dignity depended on their social location. He and they operated on very different levels.

The reading from Hebrews also deals with different levels, but in this case, they are temporal rather than social. The Letter to the Hebrews challenges us to place ourselves in biblical time and remember how our ancestors came to know God. Then, just as we begin to grasp the utter awe of witnessing God’s self-manifestation in frightening fire, the author says: “That’s where you came from, but today you are somewhere else”.

With that, we are then given a glimpse of the future God has planned. It is symbolized as a holy city, with everyone totally engaged in inaugural festivities. There’s a banquet on every block. Here, time is measured in quality rather than quantity.

The joy of this vision flows counter-clockwise as our irresistibly appealing God draws everyone and everything toward the perfection for which we were created.

This vision of God's future freed Jesus. Knowing where he was going allowed him to be just exactly who he was at every table. As he watched folks jockey for position and saw the embarrassed host try to herd them into the right places, there had to be a playful glint in his eye as he whispered to some: "Go down lower, then he'll have to come find you!"

He probably smiled when he said to the harried host, "Next time, invite the blind and the hungry. They won't notice where they sit as long as there's food".

Even if Jesus said it lightheartedly, he was certainly serious about the revision of the guest list, and not just because the outcasts would be more interesting than the inner circle.

Every meal Jesus shared was an experience of communion. Any exclusivity in such a setting would be reprehensible.

Seeking communion with people who are different from ourselves is a path toward true conversion.

It could well be uncomfortable as our values get re-arranged, but it will also be a rehearsal for enjoying the peace and comfort of communion at the banquet God has prepared for us—for all of us, for each and every one of us, without distinction.

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