

Twenty Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

During this last week I have had many opportunities to choose a place at table with a group of other people. The priests and deacons of the Archdiocese have been meeting together at the Passionist Monastery reflecting upon our call to be Companions in Ministry of the Compassion of God. Having meals together was an important part of our gathering. The tables were all round and so there were no special places of honour at the tables. But we still had to choose where we sat. The makeup of the priests in our diocese has changed a lot in recent years and there are many priests that I do not know. There are now 23 priests serving in our diocese who have come from India. There are five from Africa. Choosing to sit next to some of those priests gave me a chance to get to know them a little better. They became less like strangers and more like Companions in Ministry.

In the time of Jesus it seems people had to choose who they sat next to around the tables at wedding banquets or other formal public meals. But there was a real danger that they could get it wrong. Naturally enough people wanted to take the seats of honour near the one who invited them. But if they were later demoted to a lower place at table then they suffered a pretty horrible fate. The loss of face was immense and long lasting.

Jesus uses this common experience as a parable to speak to us about who we choose to sit near in our world. If we are people who are always looking for places of honour at table; if we are people who are seeking out the limelight; if we are choosing to spend all of our time with people who will favour us and treat us well, then we are in trouble. In the kingdom of God, when values are turned on their head, then we may well be asked to take the lowest place at table. What sort of shame will we experience then? When what is of real value is made clear to all, then it will be seen that we have been making some wrong choices.

Jesus advises us to learn humility so that we may be honoured by God. Humility is a particularly Christian virtue. In the Hellenistic world that Luke was living in, humility was considered to be a vice rather than a virtue. But Jesus showed us the way of humility by lowering himself so that we could be raised up with him. Jesus advises us here to invite to our tables people who are incapable of inviting us to theirs. Jesus advises us to invite the poor the crippled the lame and the blind. "That they cannot pay you back means that you are fortunate, because repayment will be made to you when the virtuous rise again." The ones who cannot invite you to their tables now, will make you very welcome in heaven.

It sounds pretty good in theory, but it is pretty hard to do in practice. Most of us find it very difficult to welcome strangers into our homes. But maybe what the Lord is inviting us to do is to take small steps to cross the barriers that keep us strangers to one another. Just trying to get our tongue around the name of someone who has come from a different culture can be a first step. Remembering that name and greeting them by name when we meet them next breaks down barriers between us. The sign of peace at Mass can be a moment of connection. Why don't we ask the person their name when we offer them the sign of peace? We may feel a bit of a goose when we have to say to someone, "I've seen you here at Mass for ten years, but I do not know your name." Perhaps Jesus had that in mind when he said that we have to humble ourselves to be exalted.

Small gestures of hospitality grow into bigger ones. The Indian priests invited us all to play cricket with them on the Monastery oval on Wednesday and Thursday after lunch. Not many went out in the rain on Wednesday afternoon but there were many more ready to hold the bad or roll their arm when the sun was shining on Thursday. Here were these newcomers inviting the ones who had been around for a long time to join them in something that they loved doing. It was a little bit like the kind of reversal that Jesus spoke of in the gospel when the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame will

welcome into heaven those who have made them welcome into their lives while here on earth.

Last Sunday's shared lunch for parishioners at St. Francis de Sales Community Sports Centre was a small step at getting to know each other a little better. We need to keep finding ways that will make that easier. Perhaps it is time to remind ourselves to wear our name badges when we come to Mass. The Quiz night in the Parish Hall at Strathalbyn on September 14th. could be another chance to sit at table with some people we do not know so well. It will also support the great work that the Knights of the Southern Cross do.

One of the reflections that was shared with us this week was by a young man who works with the youth of our Archdiocese. Peter gave us a way of connecting with others that made a lot of sense to me. It has three stages. We first see someone; we notice them as individuals. We then get to know them, we listen for what their interests are, what they are passionate about. And then we value them for who they are and what gifts they have been given. Whenever we do this, we unlock for the person we have seen, known and valued, the potential that they have to be for others, the potential that they have to be community builders. I think it is something that we could all be doing for one another.