

Twenty Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

I am told that one of the more difficult tasks a couple has when they are preparing for their wedding is to allot the places at table for the guests at their wedding reception. As hard as the task may be it does make it easy for the guests to know where they may sit.

In the time of Jesus it seems that people had to choose themselves where they sat 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 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. We have permission to introduce ourselves to one another when someone comes and sits beside us at Mass. It will not interrupt our prayer but enrich it. The sign of peace at Mass can be another moment of connection. We are not yet shaking each other's hands but a reverent

bow and offering the sign of peace using the other person's name can be rather beautiful. If we need to ask the person's name again that is practicing humility.

There are many ways that we can measure how well we are doing at getting to know each other as a parish community. One might be the time it takes for someone new to move from sitting in the foyer to sitting in the body of the church. Another measure might be the time it takes for people to feel comfortable enough to stay for a while after Mass. Another may be the number of parishioners who remember our birthday. Perhaps the clearest measure of success will be the number of parishioners who are not related to us who come to our funeral. But let's not wait to put that one to the test.

Today is Social Justice Sunday. This year's Social Justice Statement is about Domestic Violence, entitled "Respect: Confronting violence and Abuse". It is not an easy read, but it is important for us to reflect upon this widespread reality in our community. It invites us first to listen to the stories of women and children about domestic violence. It then helps us to identify the drivers and enablers of violence and abuse. The statement then talks about those things that will bring about change: respect, dignity, justice, transformation and hope. It concludes by talking about building community capacity for respectful relationships.

In that final section we read, "The roots of violence lie in the abuse of power to control and dominate others. This stands in stark contrast to the relationships to which God calls us – relationships marked by equality rather than domination and violence, respect and freedom rather than coercion and control.

Listening to women and reflecting on available research, we have come to understand that some of the ways in which Church people speak about leadership and submission, the sanctity of marriage, suffering and forgiveness, may contribute to a culture in which the domination and control of women by men is justified and normalised. We can take greater care in the language that we use. We can speak more clearly about the sinfulness of domestic violence. We can debunk the misuse of faith sources to justify violent or abusive behaviour or to coerce women in marriages marked by these behaviours to stay in unsafe situations.

Greater attention to respect for the dignity of each person made in the image and likeness of God and the equality in Christ of all people, imitation of the Christ-like quality of respect and care for all people especially the poorest and most vulnerable, and the practice of the virtues of justice and solidarity can enable us to be more true to the Good News of Jesus."