**22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year C**

**28th August 2022**

**Reading 1 Ecclesiasticus 3:17-20, 28-29**

In the Roman and Greek civilisations humility was commonly despised as weakness. Assertiveness was a virtue. (Not so different to us then!) Christianity went against the tide in preferring it to pride. But Christians were not the first to do so. The first reading is a lesson on humility, from Alexandria, about 190 to 180 B.C. It has been chosen to fit the gospel of the day. Pride is the deadliest of the seven deadly sins, while humility is perhaps the most characteristic of Christian virtues. The humble person finds "favour in the sight of the Lord," not because that favour is a reward for humility, but because humility means abandoning self-assertion, foregoing trust in one's own righteousness, and allowing God to act where we are helpless.

The thoughts are in praise of one who is meek, gentle, kindly, affable, humble. Meekness involves a consciousness of one's own weakness (even when one holds authority). Ben Sirach treasured the Jewish wisdom which was based on the Law and he believed that the 'fear of the Lord' - commitment to God - was the beginning of true wisdom (1:14). A humble person is open to the Lord and never rejects wisdom, no matter where it comes from. Ben Sirach declares God's love for the person who approaches him with gentleness and an open heart. Not only does God appreciate the underlying strength of meekness, but friends welcome the modest person and neighbours appreciate one's willingness to learn. Pride and self-glorification raise a barrier to God's graciousness and to communion with our fellows.

**Responsorial Psalm: 67;4-7 & 10-11**

Psalm 67 is thought by some scholars to be a series of headings to several different hymns rather than a psalm in its own right. I am told that to read it in Hebrew is rather like reading the chapter headings of a book. Nevertheless, it contains passages of considerable beauty, and it is possible, as is done here, to combine excerpts from it successfully. This then becomes a hymn of praise to God for granting his favour to the poor (the "humble" of the other readings).

**Reading II: Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24**

The second reading is part of a longer section which contrasts the ‘old covenant’ represented by Mount Sinai with the ‘new’ as represented by the heavenly city of Mount Zion. (Zion was the south-western suburb of Jerusalem and the name gradually became a synonym for the whole city.)

The first sentence records the legendary reactions of the people on hearing Moses’ revelation. (Exodus Ch.19 and Deuteronomy 4;10-15) The second and third sentences draw a more welcome image of the Christian alternative.

Midrash is a Jewish term for speculative commentary on a Biblical text. It is a technique that the author of Hebrews finds useful. He thus emphasizes the element of dread in the relations between God and humankind under the old covenant (vv. 18-21). The 'heavenly Jerusalem' (v. 22) belongs to the heavenly world of spiritual realities and meeting with God (Revelation 3:12; 21:2, 10; Galatians 4:26) It belongs to the messianic age ushered in by Christ.

The author talks of the 'now' and the 'not yet' of Christian existence in this world. He speaks of those who are still on their journey to God; and yet, because they have already been baptised, he can speak of them as already citizens of heaven. They join the ‘spirits of the saints who have been made perfect’ who are the heroes of the Old Testament.

**Gospel: Luke 14:1 & 7-14**

Jesus’ two parables are connected by their common setting at a meal attended by a mixed group of supporters and others. The first one looks like a piece of cynical advice on how to behave at a dinner party so as to look good amongst one’s neighbours. The same idea was originally presented as a piece of common sense in Proverbs 25:6-7— 'It is better to be told "come up here" than to be put down in the presence of a noble.'

The key to the passage is the last sentence of the 1st paragraph. (v.11) It is a saying which also occurs in Luke 18:14 as a generalizing conclusion to The Pharisee and the Publican. Here, however, is its proper place. The passive tense stands for the action of God ('For all who exalt themselves will God humble, and those who humble themselves will God exalt'), and the future tense refers to the judgment (see 14:14).

But though it is possible that Jesus used cynicism, this parable must not be interpreted as a piece of worldly wisdom. Neither should it be thought of as a lesson in humility, though that is how it is usually understood. It is more profound than that. It deals rather with an aspect of one's relationship with God.

God, in the person of Jesus, is inviting all people to the messianic feast. In the ancient world, starvation was a frequent cause of death and a feast became the contrasting feature of paradise. So in Eschatology (the last things) the Judgement was followed by a feast for all who had been declared, though not found, innocent. The only gracious way to accept this invitation is to renounce any entitlement of one's own.

The Pharisees not only took for granted that they would be present but they even expected the best seats as a reward for keeping the Torah. They did not understand that their presence depended on humility and gratitude.

The second paragraph likewise is not a piece of worldly advice but a kind of parable. Its point is that our presence at the messianic banquet depends on how we have treated our neighbours. Those in need cannot pay us back and neither can we pay God what we owe him. In other words, forgive others and God will forgive you. Thus, Christian humility is not purely a passive virtue; like faith, to which it is closely related, it is highly active.

The humility which Christ demonstrated and which his disciples must display may be contrasted with the courts of many medieval popes. Some behaved as Princes of city kingdoms and modelled their courts after those of contemporary rulers. They led military campaigns, using excommunication as a weapon on their enemy.

More recently the 18th and 19th century caricatures of insufferable bishops, priests and ministers were not confined to the fiction of Anthony Trollope.

Now the drift of the parable is clear. If the scribes and pharisees claimed preferential treatment, they did so on their standing as religious men. They took for granted that God would see things in this way too and allocate them the first places in the kingdom. Here they are quietly warned that they may be fortunate to get in at all. It is not difficult to see that the warning could continue to ring in the ears of the professional religious men of the Christian Church.

The second parable, also, is not practical advice as much as a situation illustrating the relationship between God and his people. Jesus teaches that a limited and self-serving love is worthless in the sight of God (see Luke 6:32-34). The ‘love’ that binds together those of like minds is nothing better than one of self-interest. The sorrow one feels in a bereavement is sorrow for oneself for that which is lost. The stroking of a family pet satisfies one’s inner need of companionship.

It must be strongly emphasised that there is nothing wrong with any of these emotions. They are natural and essential to social harmony. But they must not be confused with agape – the love of Christ.

The passage is a commentary on 6:35 - 'Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.' Those who act from motives of disinterested love will have places at the messianic feast (v. 14).