

When did you last have a party? Who was on the guest list?

I wonder sometimes how fundamentalists, say in the deep South of the US of A, how they view such a passage as today's Gospel. They will happily handle poisonous snakes and drink deadly poisons with the assurance that Mk 16, 17-18, will be their protection; but do they never invite their relations and friends to a meal on the basis of Lk. 14,13-14? We are all a bit choosy, I suppose, over which bits of the Bible to give our whole hearted support.

Good sense, as well as Church teaching allows us, middle of the road, folk some latitude in our interpretation of Jesus' words. He was a man of his Mediterranean world and of his Palestinian day and was prone to exaggeration to make his point. If we judged the Lord's literal words by his actions then he is condemned as a hypocrite. Did he not both receive hospitality from his friends, and generously give forth the same? He most certainly did. He dined with Martha and Mary, and in the fourth Gospel was a frequent guest of theirs with their brother Lazarus in attendance. And he hosted a significant dinner for his twelve disciples the night before his death. So you need not worry that your last dinner party was arranged to impress the boss or to regale your daughter and her fiancée's nearest and dearest on their engagement. Jesus' instructions are not an absolute command but a reminder to keep a particular set of values in mind.

Jesus' accepted a meal from wherever it was offered. He was, as in today's Gospel, often invited as guest of honour at the house of a Pharisee; and they were very particular as to whom they would dine with. Their name may mean 'the separate ones' and refer to their exclusive meal arrangements. They ate with other Pharisees whom they could be assured were as ritually clean as they thought themselves to be. So they must have felt that Jesus was one of them; or such a notable figure that he could not be ignored. On several occasions Jesus spoke against his host; or, as here, gave caustic advice. He could be a difficult guest.

Jesus, it seems, would dine with anyone. But his preferred table companions were the people he counsels us to invite to our meals: the sick, the poor, the blind, the lame. Incidentally, the very people who were excluded from worship in the Temple. Here is a subtle but real attack on the way the Temple functioned. Jesus used meals to proclaim the Good News. Fellowship with him was open to anyone who would break bread with him; and change their way of looking at the world as a consequence; imbibing the values of the Kingdom as they consumed the fare he blessed and shared.

Jesus tells his host and his companions to take the lowest place when they enter a dining room. It is apiece with his recurring saying that the last will be first, the first last; the highest will be brought low and the humble exalted. This was the message of his earthly existence. The Son of God came into the world and took the lowest place; for no place is lower, more wretched, more humiliating, more shameful than hanging

naked in torture as a public spectacle; with the expectation that when death finally, mercifully came your body would be carrion for the vultures and the wild dogs.

Why did Jesus take the lowest place? This has puzzled spiritual thinkers from the earliest days of the Church. Charles de Foucauld, a convert to Catholicism from a noble background, in the latter half of the 19th century, pondered this question. Why had Jesus voluntarily lost himself in the daily monotony of thirty years rough, miserable work? Why had he not been born into a family of influence, among the people who count in society? The answer he came to was that Jesus had sought out the lowest place so that no one could take it from him. "Nazareth was the lowest place, the place of the poor, the unknown, of those who didn't count, of the mass of workers, of men subject to work's grim demands just for a scrap of bread. But there is more. Jesus is 'the Holy One of God'. But the Holy One of God realised his sanctity not in an extraordinary life, but in one impregnated with ordinary things: work, family and social life, obscure activities, simple things shared by everyone. The perfection of God is cast in a material which men almost despise, which they don't consider worth searching for because of its simplicity, its lack of interest, because it is common to all." (Quote from Carlo Carretto, *Letters from the Desert*, London, DLT, 1992, 92-93).

Foucauld's inspiration led to the founding of The Little Brothers of Jesus, a group committed to working among the very poor. Our Pope Francis tirelessly teaches, the Church is at its best, most Christ-like, when it lives among the poor. It is at its very worst when it is sated with, and seated with, power.

Jesus teaching in today's Gospel is not a matter of table etiquette, or dining room politics. It is an insight into his own self, his ministry and his mission; and thus an insight into the nature of God. To be God-like we must imitate him.

So, when you next have a dinner party, who will you invite?