

Jesus was a party-animal. He liked social occasions; he liked to be where there was food and drink. So much so that his enemies could claim he was 'a glutton and a drunkard'. So many times in the Gospels we see him eating; we hear him talking about eating, using a banquet as an image for his Father's Kingdom; multiplying loaves so that the crowds do not leave him hungry, turning water into wine by the gallon so that the party does not peter out amid murmurings of 'penny-pinching parents' which would have brought eternal disgrace to the newly married couple and their families; he accepted any invitations to dine, even with Pharisees, and they were most particular about eating only with those whom they considered to be as pure as themselves, which usually will have meant other Pharisees. The name may mean 'the separated ones', as they sought to live lives of Temple worship-like purity in their daily lives.

Jesus, it is clear, would eat with anyone. But with those who considered themselves up the social scale he could be a difficult guest. Remember how he upbraided a leading Pharisee at his own table when the customary courtesies of kissing and washing feet had not been offered by the host, but provided by a nameless woman who 'had a bad name'. The host is challenged both for his negligent discourtesy and his lack of forgiveness.

In today's Gospel Jesus gives some guidelines on table politics. Down the centuries, across cultures, where you sat at table has had a bearing on social status. In medieval feudal England it was shaming to be below the salt; it is even today an honour to be invited to 'Top Table'. In Jesus' day there was clearly a rush to get to the best couch, reclining close to the host. Jesus gives the sage advice to take a far away place, in the hopeful expectation that your host will not allow you to languish far from his conversation. It is of course a dangerous manoeuvre as you might be left amid the unwashed. But it does accord with Jesus world view, often repeated, that the first will be last and the last first. Hence a man who consistently chose the lowest place, eventually dying the horrendous and shameful death of a slave on a cross would be acclaimed with the name which is above every other name, the never-to-be-spoken name of God.

Jesus then goes on to give a lesson in how to write your guest list. Do not send invites to those who will pay you back by inviting you to a party at their place. Then who do you invite? The blind, the lame, the ones who lie at the gate and are licked by the street dogs as they long for the droppings from the rich man's table, for example. The very people who never get invitations, except to their own funeral. All those on the list incidentally, the lame, the blind were barred from worship in the Temple because they were not perfect specimens.

While Jesus would accept an invitation from anyone, the people whose company he

preferred were these sort of people; the ones who couldn't pay him back, other than listening to his teaching, and trying to put what he taught them into practice. It is typical of Jesus' technique that he attacks the 'haves' who are also the know-it-alls, and is strident against them; and he nurtures the lowly, who have no self-respect until he affirms them by his presence, his company, his food and drink, his compassion.

Yesterday we celebrated a twenty-fifth wedding anniversary at the Vigil Mass; and used the readings for today. It is not an obvious choice of Gospel passage for a wedding celebration, but there is a connection. When a couple commit themselves to each other in the Sacrament of marriage they promise "to accept children lovingly from God and bring them up according to the Law of Christ and his Church". The promise is unconditional. We do not promise to accept them lovingly if they are clever and beautiful, but reject them if they are slow and plain. We accept children as gift, and cherish them. They are invited to the party however they are.

These days society accepts that child rearing is able to be planned, and if the child is going to be inconvenient in any way, coming at the wrong time, or likely to be a burden because of some defect, or even if the child has a disfigurement such as a hair-lip, then the child in the womb can be destroyed. We are even moving towards designed babies. It is a brave new world of horror. Invite everyone to the party, says Jesus, the blind, the lame, the poor. They will not pay you back with an invitation but they will enrich you, and reserve you a place at the Lord's table.