

Markie and I are going to a wedding in three weeks, which will culminate in a sit-down meal. It will of course be a joyous occasion, full of goodwill, but one of the things that will make it stress-free for us – and all the other guests – is that we won't have to think about where we are going to sit, because the happy couple are this weekend drawing up a seating plan.

Now, no doubt some will think to themselves that they were expecting to be better placed than their allocated seat, while others will be pleasantly surprised to be sitting closer to the top table than they expected.

Jesus of course is quite clear about these matters – it's much better to assume you will not get one of the best seats in the house, because if you do make that assumption and stand hopefully behind one of the more prominent chairs you will be humiliated when the host says, sorry you're behind that pillar over there. Likewise, when you hover by the pillar, you will be pleasantly surprised when the host says no, no come and sit near me.

Of course, we also have to be prepared to come to terms with the possibility that the host says, that's fine you sit by the pillar – and all that says about our perceived status

The first shall be last and the last shall be first, Jesus says frequently. So be humble, he says here, because then you will be exalted. Don't exalt yourself or you will be humbled.

Anyone would think Jesus had been prompted to make these remarks by our reading from Proverbs. Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, "Come up here," than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.

Being humble is about always remembering that everything we have, especially any sense of importance because of our achievements, of high social standing, is the result of God's extravagant grace, As John the Baptist put it, I must decrease so that he may increase.

In terms of this parable, being humble is about making sure that everyone else has a seat at the table before worrying about where we are going to sit. And let's face it, there are plenty of people in our society who have never had a seat at the table, and unfortunately the church doesn't have clean hands when it comes to inviting everyone to its table. But as our Hebrew reading reminds us very clearly, we never know when we have entertained an angel – or perhaps more importantly – have refused to entertain an angel.

I find this Gospel reading fascinating. First of all, Jesus gets an invitation to a meal with a leader of the Pharisees – on the Sabbath. I mean, who was doing the cooking? Surely a lunch party or a dinner party wasn't permitted on the Sabbath. And why would a prominent Pharisee invite Jesus anyway given he was often so rude about them?

The reading tells us the Pharisees were watching Jesus. Now, the assumption we generally make is that the Pharisees wanted to trap him, but we have to be careful because we shouldn't jump to the conclusion that everything about the Pharisees was bad. After all, some Pharisees warned Jesus that Herod was plotting to kill him and Paul describes himself as a Pharisee who was faultless in his righteousness – and it clearly wasn't something he was embarrassed about.

So maybe these particular Pharisees genuinely wanted to know more about this itinerant peasant preacher and teacher and why so many people followed him so enthusiastically. He certainly silenced them when he healed the man with dropsy before the meal, no doubt because they couldn't fault his logic.

In the first parable Jesus speaks to the guests, pointing to their desperation for affirmation of their social status. Basically, what he is saying is that social status isn't an issue in God's kingdom because there is no pecking order. I'm reminded of the mural on which people are invited to assess their position on the rungs of the ladder up to heaven assuming God is at the top and that people like Hitler and Pol Pot are at the very bottom. Whatever we may think of ourselves – and most people apparently put themselves at about 20% – the reality is we've barely got a toe on the bottom rung, given how far we fall short of the glory of God.

And that leads me on to the second parable where Jesus tells his host not to invite his relatives, his best mates, or people of

equal social standing, or people who could propel him up the greasy pole of personal ambition just by their proximity to him, to a banquet, knowing that they will repay his hospitality with a return invitation.

Because, of course, that's what we do isn't it? People we invite to a meal are generally either family, friends or new acquaintances we would like to be friends. We don't want disagreeable people around our table

No, Jesus tells his host, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind, and he will be blessed precisely because those are the very people who have no chance of repaying him. Instead, he will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

It's all quite unsettling isn't it, because we all feel we're due a certain degree of recognition, yet here Jesus tells us not to network, rather to open our homes to people who can do nothing for us, who we have no affinity with. And why does he do that? Because God's kingdom is about abundance, generosity, hospitality, not stinginess, selfishness, self-advancement.

Too much of the Western world is all about being 'the best..', 'the most..'. How about dropping those superlatives from our vocabulary, or at least modifying them to something like being the best we can be? Because we can't all be the best, and God knows that and is fine with that.

So this parable speaks to the very heart of our relationship with God. Because the point Jesus was making, and I'm sure it wouldn't have been lost on his fellow guests, is that we, you, me, all of us, are the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind.

We have no hope of repaying God for what God has done for us. But that's absolutely not a problem because God knows that – and he still wants us at the wedding feast to end all wedding feasts for the simple reason that he loves us and wants to be in relationship with us.

Slightly paraphrasing the chorus of Hillsong's wonderful worship song Who You Say I am, it says, At my Father's table there's a place for me, I'm a child of God, Yes I am. I am chosen not forsaken, I am who you say I am.

What truth and what hope those words proclaim. What the world says about our social status and our place in the pecking order is both an irrelevance to God and a hindrance to what really matters.

We are who God says we are, not who the world says we are. If we really believe in justice and loving our neighbour as ourselves, we need to look beyond the superficiality of worldly judgements and assessments.

Now, in contrast to first century Judea where everybody in a village would know everyone else, having an open door policy doesn't really work in our 21<sup>st</sup> century society. But that hasn't

stopped people using their imagination to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind to regular feasts.

Take Soul Food, a charity started eight years at St Paul's and St George's church in Edinburgh. The then associate rector discovered that Saturday nights were the most isolating night of the week for the homeless and so the church started offering a sit-down home-cooked meal with proper cutlery, plates, linen tablecloths etc for the city's homeless and marginalised – with the congregation acting as cooks, waiting staff, bottle washers etc.

Now the homeless can find a high-quality meal somewhere in Edinburgh every day of the week except Wednesdays, and the idea has spread to Bristol and Colchester, and only this morning I discovered there are plans afoot to provide a Soul Food meal in Livingston.

Many of the original guests at P's & G's now help with hosting and serving, because they have had their lives transformed through the freely-given gift of hospitality, through the freely-given gift of being paid attention to, of being known by their name rather than just thought of as that poor homeless person. How many of those guests have been angels in disguise?

Now I am not going to suggest that Penicuik needs a similar scheme or could even operate one on that sort of scale, because I don't know all the facts or everything that is

already going on. But as Jesus reminds us in the parable of the sheep and the goats, when I was hungry you fed me.

Even in these tough inflationary times and rocketing energy bills most of us can afford to slip something, even a can of baked beans, into the collection bins almost every supermarket now provide – because it's not just the homeless struggling to stave off hunger.

And whatever way we get involved in this or in any other Christian work, we need to offer the very best we can, even if it feels like the widow's mite at times. We don't do it to make ourselves look good in the eyes of other people or even to feel good about ourselves, but because how else can we honour God, who has freely given us the very best he has to offer. Amen