

Reflections on the Scriptures for the 22nd Sunday in Ordinary time, C cycle.

♪♪ *The Lord hears the cry of the poor, blessed be the Lord* ♪♪

In the Gospel story we just heard, Jesus goes out to dinner, and immediately disturbs the peace of his host and the other guests. In the verses which the Catholic lectionary omits in today's Gospel [Luke 14:2-6], Jesus heals someone with "dropsy". In this he reveals what *God* values most.

Jesus cares for those in any need. There was a sick person right in front of him, one of the crippled, the lame, & the poor he talks about at the end of the Gospel passage; one of those people who would never have been *invited* to this Sabbath dinner, but probably crashed the party. He or she is suffering from a disease we would call *edema*, retention of fluid sometimes caused by diabetes or a heart condition.

Jesus asks about what is lawful. They were silent because there were *two* values involved. The letter of the law said you could not work on the Sabbath, but the Prophets and the Psalms were very clear about the call to care for the poor.

"The Lord hears the cry of the poor," is a verse from Psalm 34 & today's Responsorial Psalm, Psalm 68, sings the same message Jesus teaches:

"God, in your goodness, you have made a home for the poor" "God is the father of orphans and the defender of widows." "God gives a home to the forsaken and showers down a bountiful rain to provide for the needy."

Jesus makes it very clear that the call to care for the poor is more important than even the command to rest on the Sabbath. The parable that follows is really about how *God* acts, and how you and I are called to respond. It is *Christ* who invites the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind to *God's* heavenly banquet. Our response includes finding our own need for *God's* love and mercy, and reaching out to the ones *God* most values - to the ones who are *Christ* himself in our midst.

I thought of that message as I was watching the movie *The Butler* last week, and as I listened to coverage of the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington. I heard the message of the Gospel in the "I have a dream" speech of Martin Luther King, Jr. We have come a long way since 1963, but we still have a long way to go. The poor of every race, language and way of life are still the ones Jesus cares for and calls us to love. We each have to find our own way to respond to this clear command of both the Scripture and the Church.

And then there is the theme of humility, found both in the first reading and the Gospel. Humbling myself is not about putting myself down, it's about reality and honesty. It's about my relationship with *God* and with the rest of the human race, the rest of the people sitting at the "Table of plenty". It is about finding my own poverty, my own *"God-sized hole"* which connects me with the One who alone can fill it.

Sometimes I think a recovering alcoholic is very blessed. He or she knows their own powerlessness so well that there is no question of whether they will turn their life and will over to the care of God. And, as one of my mentors, Fr. Juvenal Lalor, used to say so often, we are all recovering self-a-holics.

That's the connection between the healing story and the parable. If I exalt *myself* it usually means I am afraid I am not good enough. I am covering the weakness, the powerlessness which is the place where God meets me. I am blocking God's healing love.

In the Gospel, Jesus notices that some people are taking the places of honor, the places that indicate that they are important. They are told that they don't belong there, they are not worthy of a place at the head table.

In the story Jesus tells, God is really the host at the wedding banquet. When the host says to the person who takes the lowest place, "*My friend,*" you could miss that word if you were not listening; "*My friend.*" It is God who calls me *friend*, it is God who gives me the *gift* of a place at the table. What that says to me is that you may be able to buy status, but you can only receive friendship. I can't buy God's favor, or force God to give me status.

To make it personal, my ordination does not give me *status* before God, it describes the service I am called to do. It is God who invites all of us, regardless of our status in the world or the church, and in spite of our unworthiness, to the table of plenty.

We say before communion, in effect, "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you." Neither am I worthy of God welcoming me, but that does not limit God. I cannot earn, force, or buy God's invitation, it is given to me in spite of my poverty or wealth. I can only respond to the call in humility. As Clarence Jordan writes in his "*Cotton Patch Parables of Liberation*", "Anyone who promotes himself or herself will be humiliated, and one who humbles herself or himself will be promoted."

Then Jesus applies this truth to the people at the dinner and to us today. He once again disturbs the false peace of the Pharisees by saying, in effect, "This is the way God acts towards the poor and the humble, I challenge you to act like God does." Take care of the poor, the crippled the lame and the blind, without expecting payment. That goes against the values of our culture so blatantly that many people don't apply what they read in the Bible or hear in Church to their business and political choices, or even to their choice to support their parish.

But Jesus calls us to live these Gospel values not only when we are in church, but when we do business, when we go to school, when we shop, when we vote and when we make love. The Scripture today invites me to recognize how God acts, and to imitate that in my actions and attitudes.

To be humble, as Jesus was, is to admit the great distance between God and myself, and even between Jesus and me. To be humble is to mean it when I pray, "Lord I am not worthy." But it also means to accept his invitation to come up higher, to receive the gift of his presence within me, to believe that his word of love and forgiveness gives me the power to be healed and to be a healing presence in the world and the Church.

To be humble is to admit that I am made in the image and likeness of God, even though I do not always reflect that image. As Pope John Paul was so fond of saying, Christ is the image of what it means to be fully human. So to act like God does towards the poor not only means a place in heaven after I die, it means to be true to my own deepest humanity right now. Then even my own poverty and powerlessness is not a barrier to God's love and friendship but an open welcome to God's gifts.

Readings for the 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, C cycle:

Sirach 3:17-18, 20, 28-29 *Humble yourself and you will find favor with God.*

Psalm 68: 4-5, 6-7, 10-11 *"God, in your goodness, you have made a home for the poor."*

Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24 *You have come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God*

Alleluia verse: *Take my yoke upon you, says the Lord, and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart*

Luke 14:1, [2-6], 7-14 *The Lord hears the cry of the poor, blessed be the Lord*