



## Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

readings: [Ecclesiasticus 10 12-18](#); [Hebrews 13 1-8, 15-16](#); [Luke 14 1, 7-14](#)

28<sup>th</sup> August 2022

It has been suggested that we British have two major obsessions: one we always talk about: “*the weather*” and one we are reluctant to talk about, namely: “*social class*” (unless you’re a Tory leadership candidate trying unconvincingly to burnish your family’s somewhat spurious working-class antecedents). Well this sermon, inspired by the gospel reading, is going to breach that taboo, and talk about the latter: about the long-standing existence of social classes each of whom share common interests, values and networks, along with common conceptions of levels of perceived entitlement and privilege.

Although nowadays we don’t describe this overtly in terms of class labels, but rather in terms of “capital”: *economic capital* in terms of your wealth and income; *cultural capital* in terms of your tastes, interests and activities, and *social capital* in terms of your networks, friendships and associates, we are still talking about (or rather not talking about) the stratification into upper, middle and lower classes (albeit now rather politically incorrect terms) so brilliantly immortalised by the John Cleese, Ronnie Barker & Ronnie Corbett “Class System” sketch from 1966.

And for those of you who don’t recall or were not even born at the time: John Cleese: tall, patrician and clearly upper class; Ronnie Barker: middle in height, middle in dress and middle in class; and Ronnie Corbett: short in stature and blue in collar all standing in line, with Barker saying of Cleese: “I look up to him because *he* is upper class, but I look down on *him* (Corbett) because he is lower class” ..... leaving Corbett with the immortal line “*I know my place*”.

Jesus, in our gospel reading from Luke, tells a parable about “*knowing your place*” and uses it to challenge the comfortableness of the prevailing social order. He speaks into the social matrix of 1st Century Palestine life with words of both universal wisdom and astounding advice still as relevant today.

Invited to the dinner table of a leading Pharisee, Pharisees who are watching Jesus closely for deviations from the Sabbath Law, he in turn is watching them. He observes the jockeying for pole position of the guests, the drive for pride of place which our reading from Ecclesiasticus abhors. He challenges them as to the wisdom of their actions. And he offers words of astounding advice to his host as to who he should really be inviting to his table.

Jesus tells the story of a wedding reception...and there is nothing more fraught with social danger than the seating plan, which is why such plans should be thought-through well in advance. I still recall from my own wedding (52 years ago this month) the angst generated by two of my aged aunts who made it plain that their designated seating position was not commensurate with their own perception of their family status.

But in Jesus’s time, it was even more of a free-for-all. No seating plan meant that if you were a relatively undistinguished guest who had arrived early, the danger was that you took too high a place at the table, too near to the host, so that if a more distinguished guest arrived, you might embarrassingly be asked to move, being seen as someone who clearly didn’t “know their place”.

But a good seat really mattered, not only to important people but to people who were hoping to become important. A good seat wasn’t just a reflection of your present social status and relative importance; it could also be a pathway to power. Get to sit next to someone of real importance and you have their ear, into which you could pour your ideas, burnish your credentials and lay down the foundations for future constructive contact. But a bad seat at the bottom of the table could see you marginalised, patronised or ignored.

And if you think this is not really relevant for today, my own education research interviews with headteachers found many admitting that they jockeyed for place position as to who they sat next to at conferences. There were some colleagues you wanted to sit next to because you might learn something from them, or more importantly them learn about you; there were those you knew were on the same wavelength as you, and so were non-threatening; but there were others you would hang back to avoid because sitting next to them you knew all you would get was a constant drip of corrosive cynicism into your ear throughout the event. It was ever thus.

Having seen the behaviour of the Pharisee's guests, on the face of it, Jesus is advocating a self-deprecating humility, of not putting yourself too far forward for fear of rebuff, for not seeking the honour of a higher place in order to avoid potential shame. He is suggesting that if you deliberately slip into the bottom place and then are asked to move higher, your display of humility will gain you all the more honour.

But this is more than a non-threatening story about 1<sup>st</sup> Century social etiquette and the universal virtue of humility: it is actually a call for radical change.

Jesus had been invited to the dinner table of this leading Pharisee: a man of some importance who presumably wanted to surround himself with others of similar importance or potential use. A man who perhaps "collected" local celebrities for the delectation of his guests; a different class of person such as Jesus: the much talked about rough, radical, outspoken Galilean prophet.

But Jesus doesn't conform to social expectation. Not only does he give the guests a lesson on seating humility, he also challenges his host about his invitational priorities. And nowhere in the playbook of social etiquette does it say that it is done to rebuke your host about his choice of guests: to challenge the social reciprocity that is the backbone of the dinner party system, then and now. *Of course* you invite the folk who are on your wavelength and in your networks, those who share your values and standards, those who can pay you back, in kind or in influence.

But Jesus urges his host to reverse the normal expectations, to subvert the social indicators, to include those who cannot return the invitation. And by such invitation, the "hospitality to strangers that can entertain angels unawares" of which the Letter to the Hebrews speaks, the marginalised can be included, the needy can be supported, the disenfranchised empowered, and the Kingdom of God is ushered in.

For in this counter-intuitive world of *divine* hospitality, *everyone* is family, everyone gets invited, everyone has their place at the table, no matter how unclean, how undesirable, how underprivileged they are.

Jesus sums it all up in a memorable pithy saying: "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled. And those who humble themselves will be exalted". Or in words perhaps more familiar to us: "the last shall be first, and the first, last".

This is more than social etiquette; this is radical revolution. It's what literary critics call *a polar-reversal*: when the North pole of belief becomes the South pole, and the South pole becomes the North pole; and *a world is overturned, a world is transformed, a world is turned upside-down*.

Our present world feels turned upside down: with upheavals in political leadership, with rising protest and populism, with wars and rumours of war, droughts and diseases, cost-of-living and climate crises. All feels like radical change, and we may want to stop the world and not overturn it.

But Jesus says: don't simply accept the status quo; don't be content with knowing your place; don't tolerate the injustice, the inequality in our world. Join in my work of change, the work of bringing in God's Kingdom where "every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain, And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed ....

*For behold I am making all things new"*.

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