

## SERMON FOR ORDINARY SUNDAY 22C ALL SAINTS BIRKENHEAD

**Sirach 10:12-18**  
**Ps. 68:4-5, 6-7, 10-11**  
**Luke 14:1,7-14**

One of the great joys of being a priest is the welcome I receive into people's homes. It is priesthood which gives me this entrée into the privacy of the lives of others. The welcome given to me as priest is expressed in a variety of ways. It may be a lavish meal, it may be tea and biscuits. Even if people are about to go out, I can tell whether or not there is a welcome.

Mostly hospitality is expressed in the attitude of the people whose home it is. When I enter a home and feel warmly welcomed, I am aware of the origin of the welcome. Such a welcome is possible because of the love which exists among those who live in that home. Hospitality is more than an expression of love for the guest. It is also an expression of love between the hosts. When there is little love between the hosts then the hospitality of welcome suffers.

There is too a responsibility on the part of the guest. It is the place of the guest, in this case the priest, to be able to

receive the welcome. I can only hope that I have not transgressed by treating lightly any welcome offered! Knowing how to receive is just as important as knowing how to welcome when it comes to hospitality.

2

The book of Sirach which is a series of ethical teachings, from approximately 200 to 175 BC, written by the Judahite scribe Ben Sira of Jerusalem reveal something of the idea of hospitality to us today.

*The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord;  
the heart has withdrawn from its Maker.*

We are told time and time again by the Prophets that this idea of 'pride' is at the center of all that is wrong with the world. Pride can become an arrogance and it can lead to people becoming corrupt.

*'The Lord overthrows the thrones of rulers,  
and enthrones the lowly in their place.  
The Lord plucks up the roots of the nations,  
and plants the humble in their place.'*

The people of God through this corruption, abuse the welcome offered by God. God had invited a people into a unique relationship with their creator. These same people reject both the relationship and the one who extended the welcome to them.

The text we hear tells us the Lord is deeply pained over the defection of the people. The Lord is at something of a loss to understand it. The people and their leaders are admonished for ‘their heart has withdrawn from its Maker.’ They are guests invited into the divine welcome and they refuse the hospitality offered. In spite of all that God has done, the people turn their backs on God and lavish their affection on things that bring no profit. ‘Their heart had withdrawn from its Maker.’

The Gospel gives answer. The answer is in the hospitality of welcome and especially in the welcome shown in sharing food. Jesus and food seem intimately connected. He was often eating with people. He ate in Peter’s home after curing Peter’s mother in law. He ate with his friends in Bethany, a remarkable meal because sitting at table was Lazarus who had been raised from the dead. Jesus was often at the table of the rich. In the home of Zacchaeus for one, Levi the tax collector for another, and in the homes of the Pharisees and of sinners. Jesus even prepared a meal he shared with his disciples. We should

not forget the invitation he accepted from the two disciples at Emmaus,

3

nor the meal prepared by Jesus for the disciples on the lakeshore. The Bible itself is full of food, from the forbidden food which Adam and Eve ate in the garden of Eden to the wedding banquet of Revelation. Food figures strongly in the Bible for a number of reasons.

Food is about Life. We cannot live without it and Jesus wants us to have fullness of life. It’s also about Celebration and this is the way we give our thanks to God for the gifts we receive. Food is about reconciliation. It’s difficult to eat and drink together without some sense of being connected to others at the table. We saw this recently displayed at our annual Mid-Winter dinner, food has integral part in our relationships. Around the table the joys and troubles of the day are shared. Hopes for the future are explored. Events of the past are relived. Food is also about status and rank. It’s about who belongs and who doesn’t. It’s used to mark people out as different, as inferior or superior, as powerful or weak. I recall once attending a wedding when I was 20 years old and still quite ignorant of the social norms of a wedding. I knew the couple very well, but was not invited to the reception. However a friend of mine who was invited and had come

from overseas kept begging me to attend, saying 'it will be fine, they know you'. I knew it wasn't going to work, but alas, I gave in. And what happened was one of the most embarrassing moments of my life. I turned up only to be told sternly by the bride's father that there was simply no room and I could not stay. I have to say it took me awhile to get over it.

.4

No wonder Jesus spoke about places at table. No wonder he spoke about who to invite to meals. He was turning the social order upside down by such remarks as those we hear in the Gospel. When people on the outside are invited to share food with those on the inside, then they all become members of the one group. In Jesus there is no outside or inside. All are invited to be part of the meal. This is a radical suggestion for a society which kept people in their social places, and still do. We are inclined to miss what would have been offensive to many of Jesus hearers. This is one of the occasions when Jesus was being provocative and people wouldn't have liked what he was saying. He was asking them to change their attitudes to the way they ate, and to change their outlook about with whom they would eat.

And we who call ourselves by the name of Christ are invited to become who we are. We are invited to be the welcoming ones who live up to the name we claim. It is the poor, the lame, the blind, who are the ones invited to the heavenly wedding banquet by Jesus. They are the ones with whom we will be welcomed. There is a place at the table for all. We are also invited to change our attitudes by taking care about the manner in which we welcome people to our table here.

5

How can we work out this sitting at table with the poor? Do we literally have to prepare food for them? I think we need to take care that we do not end up using our food yet again as a means of keeping the poor in their place. While food parcels are still essential for many people at present, they only maintain the poor in their powerless position. Maybe we first have to do what we do at any table. Perhaps just sitting down with the poor and listening to them is the first step. They may well be able to tell us best what they require for their own self-determination, it is about presence.

And so it is presence that brings us to the table of the Eucharist. This is the table of God's presence. Here is the foretaste of the heavenly banquet we will share in eternity. God welcomes us here at the banquet prepared for us. This is the banquet of God's own life in Jesus. God asks us to be what we are, the welcomed ones. God asks us to show that we are the welcomed ones by the way we worship. And being welcomed we are to be like God and welcome others. Our worship is to reflect something of the intimacy of God the Holy Trinity, the mutual exchange of love between its persons.

Our hospitality is not just for this place. It is to be taken with us into the world. The Eucharist is not completed here. It is completed in us as we go forth into the world in the name of Christ. We go with a life which somehow reproduces the welcome we have received. We will no longer need to ask "Where is the Lord?" The Lord will be seen in the hospitality we are willing to give to those Jesus loves most; the outcasts and sinners. Our life is to reflect the divine who is willing to share life with us.