

August 28th, 2022

Year C: Proper 22 (Psalm 81:1,10-16; Hebrews 13:1-8,15-16; Luke 14:1,7-14)

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Professional theologians make their living by arguing with one another over questions that nobody else has time to worry about, and the quarrel over who wrote the letter to the Hebrews is one of those questions. There is good evidence that it was **not** written by Paul, and one of the alternative possibilities is a disciple named Priscilla. One argument in her favour is that the advice given is clear, sensible and practical, and contains some things that only a woman would think of.

But we aren't going to worry about who **wrote** the letter; we're just going to look at what it says. The bit we heard contains simple guidelines for how Christians should approach life: ****share what you have; **be good to others; **have faith; **don't be greedy, and ***"show hospitality to strangers."** For this last one, the writer adds the incentive, that you never know when you might "entertain angels without knowing it."

Angels – if and what they are – is another of those endlessly debatable questions, and we're not going to worry about that today either. Instead, we're going to think about that hospitality part:– about how we respond to other people. Now, anyone who's been around for a few decades, and paying attention, already knows that the way we behave towards others always comes back on us somehow.

At the very simplest level, being kind and generous to others feeds our souls. How often does smiling at someone and just saying "Good morning" make **you** feel better? Doesn't it feel good when you give someone a helping hand, or a smile or a kind word? We cheer ourselves when we cheer others. We brighten our own lives when we brighten someone else's.

But it goes far beyond that: we may never know how a small act of kindness might have made an unexpected difference to someone else, or how they might pass it along in the future. We've all heard lots of stories about how a small, kind and generous act by a total stranger changed someone's life, restored someone's will to persevere, or changed someone's outlook. And there are even more stories about how an unnecessarily cruel or malicious act came back to bite someone. With or without angels, hospitality, or the lack of it, carries its own rewards and penalties.

Hospitality was not what the Pharisee in the gospel was offering. We aren't told why he invited Jesus to dinner. Perhaps Jesus was the evening's entertainment – the notorious and outrageous speaker, guaranteed to shock and amuse. It's remotely possible that some of them actually wanted to hear what he had to say, or perhaps catch him saying something wrong.

We don't do banquets for entertainment much these days, but we still consider them essential for special events like weddings. The seating rules for banquets haven't changed since Biblical times: the really important people sit in the middle of the top table, and importance decreases as you get further away from the top table. For our banquets, we agonize over who should sit where, and then we put out little name cards, or post the plan, to avoid a free-for-all. And even then there's usually a little mumbling and grumbling, somewhere in the room, about why Aunt Lucy is so close to the top table while Aunt Felicity is so far down.

There would be chaos at a wedding reception if everyone had to find their own place! It would be just like this Pharisee's dinner. His guests were community leaders and politicians, all elbowing one another, all wanting to make sure they got all the status they thought they deserved. It would all look pretty silly to

someone who wasn't interested in that game – someone like Jesus.

Jesus pointed out to them that they would be very embarrassed if they were asked to give up their seats for someone more important. Mind you, if they were that full of their own importance, they'd probably had that happen before!

But the advice Jesus gave wasn't much of an improvement. Imagine a whole roomful of pompous, self-important types, jostling for the **lowest** seat – all of them insisting that they're not important, just so that someone would have to tell them that they were important and should move up. Not much better is it?

And this was a sabbath meal. It should have been a time for fellowship and thanksgiving, not for social one-upping. It should have been a time for getting together to celebrate. But this meal wasn't about friendship, or taking pleasure in one another's company, or enjoying good food and being thankful for it. It was about being important and being recognized.

Banquets are not high on our list of entertainments; we've got TV and social media instead. But that craving for recognition is still there. Some people will do absolutely anything for a chance to go viral on Facebook. And some just live for the chance to get on reality TV, or on a talk show, so they can tell the world about their awful parents or their rotten children, or their torrid affairs. Some people are willing to risk everything from their dignity to life-and-limb for a little television coverage.

Lots of people still believe that being important and famous is the height of success. And modern society encourages this. We are urged to put ourselves first. We are urged to define our relationships in terms of what we get out of them, and our goals only by what we want for ourselves. Those things that our first reading talked about – hospitality, charity, kindness, – they're all considered a bit quaint. Acts of self-sacrifice are just plain peculiar, and humility is downright suspicious.

Humility has a bad reputation these days mostly because we've lost track of what it really is. The root word of 'humility' is "humus" – earth, so it means "down-to-earth"; having no pretensions, being straightforward. Humility is not about being completely submissive and deferential; that's just being a doormat. Humility is not a total lack of self-respect or self-esteem; that's being self-destructive. Humility is not letting yourself be put down by others; that's humiliation.

There are times when it is appropriate – and not lacking in humility – to sit at the head table. At a wedding reception it's OK for the bride and groom to take the top seats, even if the Mayor and the Premier are present.

It is also not lacking in humility to use the gifts God has given us. Our God-given talents and natural abilities should not be hidden in the name of humility. They are to be used to benefit the greater good. It's only lacking in humility if we start to think that we earned or deserved them somehow.

And there are times when it is appropriate – and not lacking in humility – to speak out against or stand up to wrong. Jesus showed us that being humble could also mean taking a whip and driving the corruption out of the temple.

Real humility is nothing more complicated than not putting yourself first; taking a genuine and sincere

interest in others; recognizing how much we are all alike; recognizing the dignity and worth of every human being; knowing the truth of the old saying, “There but for the grace of God go I.”

If you have to ask yourself whether you are humble, you’re already looking in the wrong direction: it’s not about YOU, it’s about OTHERS. And that can be said for all the Christian virtues that Paul – or maybe Priscilla – listed for the Hebrews.

None of us will ever perfect our Christian virtues. God knows that. But we can make a deliberate effort to look for the opportunities to live out our faith, to see ‘angels’ in unlikely places, to recognize that when we behave as Christians should, we not only change the world around us, but we also nurture our own souls. We become the people we hope to be by behaving as if we already were.

I said we weren’t going to talk about angels, but they’re hard to avoid, so let me finish with an old Persian legend about four angels who watched as God created the world.

One said, "Why did God make it?"

The second said, "How did God make it?"

The third said, "Can I have it?"

And the fourth said, "How can I help to make it better?"

The first angel was a philosopher – wanting to know the why of everything.

The second angel was a scientist – wanting to know the how of everything.

The third angel – well, we have to wonder if that one was really an angel at all!

But the fourth angel knew what the guiding question for all Christians must always be: “How can I make the world a better place?”

Amen.