

**A Sermon Preached
at
St. George's Madrid
by
The Reverend Canon John W. Kilgore, M.D.
1 September 2019
XVII Trinity
Proper 17 Year C
Jeremiah 2: 4-13
Psalm 81: 1, 10-end
Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16
Luke 14: 1, 7-14**

For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

In case you haven't noticed, Jesus has a predisposition for the downtrodden, the dispossessed, the down and out. As a Jewish rabbi, he would have been revered and we know that he had quite a following. So people were eager to invite him, to have parties for him (remember Mary and Martha who had him for dinner, Zaccheus' impromptu dinner, the dinner at Peter's mother in law's house), and today, 'he was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath [and] they were watching him closely.

I wonder what that interaction might have been like. He was always in the face of the Pharisees and those of the establishment. That dinner may well have been a bit testy! He noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, and then told them the parable about the guests being put down. So he clearly running against the grain. Swimming upstream, as he was wont to do. And he was pretty direct about it. The first will be last and the last first. Don't invite the celebrities, but rather the downtrodden, the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. That's a hard message to hear. And not very popular with us, today, I suspect.

We in the human condition, tend to be preoccupied with the high and mighty, the important, those with status. Everyone is happy to be invited to an event with a major leader, to follow their lives, in print, in media. It is human nature. People are fascinated with movie stars, sports heroes, political leaders, dignitaries. On Spanish television there has been daily coverage of King Felipe visiting his father, Rey Juan Carlos, usually accompanied by his wife and daughters. American television likewise with movie stars and political leaders. And there is an innate fascination with royalty. The English are particularly good at it but it is not unique to them, Spain, Denmark, the Netherlands, Japan, Tonga. Many here have spent time with consuls and ambassadors and major church leaders. I know I am certainly guilty — I have met a number of world dignitaries, Pope Francis three times, a president, Archbishop Tutu, a number of senators, been a private guest of a member of the House of Lords, bishops, and many ambassadors. And it's always fun and exciting. And then this passage brings me up short...

I well remember when I was in Rome at the Week of Prayer for Christian unity. At the final Vespers service the Pope was the officiant. The Archbishop of Canterbury and the Pope have

been working through the Anglican Centre in Rome on ecumenical relations between the two groups. On these occasions there was a nice group of Anglicans who dutifully took our seats in the second and third rows well in advance given the security. And about fifteen minutes before the service, the Archbishop in charge of protocol came and invited a group of us, me included amazingly, to sit in the front row. And then before the procession, invited to process, and to go outside and line up. Outside we had several private moments with the Pope. And following the service he came down and chatted us up on his way out. He is charming and lovely. But I found this passage rolling through my being. We were indeed moved up, exalted. And it was exciting and fun, and off putting.

So I ask, why was Jesus so hard on such behavior. Such happenings. I think, perhaps because it is not good for our sense of values, of self worth, of self importance. Nor is it good for those of elevated rank.

Two stories.

Walter Cronkite the very famed NBC Nightly newscaster in the US for decades was beloved. And very famous. In one of his books he tells the following story on himself. You should know as background, that he had a house on Martha's Vineyard and was an avid sailor. He recounts that he and his wife were sailing back down the Mystic River in Connecticut and following the channel's tricky turns through an expanse of shallow water. He says, "I am reminded of the time a boatload of young people sped past us here, its occupants shouting and waving their arms. I waved back a cheery greeting and my wife said, "Do you know what they were shouting?" "Why, it was 'Hello, Walter,'" I replied. "No," she said. "They were shouting, "Low water, Low water." He told the story because he realized the trap he had fallen into which his life of fame had drawn him...

Second story.

On a visit to the Beethoven museum in Bonn, Germany, a young American student became fascinated by the piano on which Beethoven had composed some of his greatest works. She asked the museum guard if she could play a few bars on it; she accompanied the request with a lavish tip, and the guard agreed. The girl went to the piano and tinkled out the opening of the Moonlight Sonata. As she was leaving she said to the guard, "I suppose all the great pianists who come here want to play on that piano." The guard shook his head. "Padarewski [the famed Polish pianist] was here a few years ago and he said he wasn't worthy to touch it."

Given that half the world goes to bed hungry every night, that more than half the world's population (3 billion people) lives on less than €2.27 per day and 1.3 billion live in extreme poverty, that is less than €1.14 per day, what are we to do with Jesus' lessons about self importance and worthiness and hobnobbing, for lack of a better term?

A third story. Sorry they are all American characters, but hopefully instructive...

William Beebe, the naturalist, used to tell this story about Teddy Roosevelt, the 26th president of the United States, 1901-1909. At Sagamore Hill, Roosevelt's country estate, after an evening of talk, the two would go out on the lawn and search the skies for a certain spot of star-like light near the lower left-hand corner of the Great Square of Pegasus. Then Roosevelt would recite:

"That is the Spiral Galaxy in Andromeda. It is as large as our Milky Way. It is one of a hundred million galaxies. It consists of one hundred billion suns, each larger than our sun."
Then Roosevelt would grin and say, "Now I think we are small enough! Let's go to bed."

What does it take to make us small enough? When should we go to bed?

Amen.