

CCV Luke 14

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer.

Let's imagine ourselves for a moment in the first story Jesus tells in our reading. A sumptuous wedding banquet has been arranged. You arrive in good time, in clothes you've spent quite a lot of yesterday afternoon getting ready. As soon as you walk into the room, you notice the atmosphere is buzzing. Canapés are being handed round, which pique your interest, but don't distract from the conversation and likewise music gently floats through the air, which quietly lifts your mood, but doesn't distract from the group of interesting people which has somehow naturally and effortlessly formed around you. You're really starting to enjoy it. There are tables, at the other end of the room and soon a little bell goes, which signals that the sit-down part of the banquet will start and people begin to make their way over to the tables. There's no discernible seating plan and people seem to just sit where they feel like.

One friend of yours looks along the room and sees a long, square table at one end. It's on a raised platform, with a good view of the whole of the rest of the room. There's a few more knives and forks per place and it looks there might be more elaborate food. So, your friend walks up and sits himself down in the middle of the long table on the raised platform. 'Well, you certainly get a good view,' he thinks to himself. There's even an extra glass of champagne. He begins to raise it to his lips and he is just beginning to feel the fruity scent on his nostrils, when he hears a cough. He turns to see a woman in an entirely white dress, her face flushed with anger and contempt.

'You're in my seat!' she cries.

He looks up in horror. He's sat in the bride's seat. Now, of course, the music has stopped. The conversation is over. Everyone is looking at him as he gets up from the bride's chair. He sought exaltation and has found only humiliation.

But then there's your other friend. She is hovering by the door, and, as everyone else sits down, she is seeing if there is a bar stool she can perch on. Then, one of the groomsmen notices her and beckons her over.

'You've known the couple for years,' he says. 'Please, sit here,' and shows her to a seat near the top table.

She seeks humiliation and finds exaltation.

It's a story easy to relate to in modern times and, like many of Jesus' parables, has humour in it, though that's easy for us to miss because the story is so familiar. As we think about what this story means for us, it's important to realise that it's more than just social etiquette. Jesus is not telling this story simply to give us advice about how to behave at a party, though, of course, it does that. Luke's agenda throughout his Gospel is not to give etiquette advice, he is telling the story of the Kingdom of God, of how Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, of how salvation comes to tax collectors and sinners. So presumably this is what this parable is about as well.

The host of the banquet therefore represents God. This is a story about how to be exalted by God. It says that the way to be exalted by God is to seek humility.

That raises the question, why should I want to be exalted by God? Well, most of us want to be exalted by something. 'Exalted' simply means 'lifted up, raised up.' When I was doing the Gospel reading a few moments ago and lifting up the book, I was 'exalting' the Gospel-book.

Most of us, most of the time, want to be exalted, by someone or something. We want to be better than the crowd and we want people to know it. Perhaps we want to be popular. We want to be well-liked in our families and in our work-places, to be looked up to, to have people nod and smile when they pass us in the corridors. Perhaps we want that bit of professional or financial success that will make everyone turn their heads to us. Perhaps we're longing for a partner, who will show everyone else how much we're really worth. Perhaps we dream of being an online sensation, with millions of followers on our page or listeners on our podcast. Many of us, in one

way or another, long to be exalted. This passage is saying that the way to get there is to seek humility, because the humble will be exalted by God and being exalted by God is the best kind of exaltation.

Being exalted by God is better than that promotion at work. Being exalted by God is better than being popular at school. Being exalted by God is better than those thousand facebook followers.

You might ask ‘how can that be true?’ Well, to answer that, think, why do you want to be exalted? Why is it that we are all so desperate to be that cut above the crowd? Does it give you a feeling of safety? With all those people on my side, who can take me down? Well, God is stronger than all those people. As one of my former lecturers said once ‘God plus one is a majority.’

Do you want to be exalted because you feel happy when people look up to you? You feel alive and energised when you’re top of the pile? Well, that is a feeling you can truly find in God. When you patiently seek joy in God, you will find more delight and joy than you could ever now know.

Do you want to be exalted because you don’t want to be alone? Well, God loves you more than you can ever imagine. I am not saying we don’t need human companionship and safety. I am saying that our fellow human beings can never supply all the love, affirmation and encouragement we crave. Our longings to be popular and successful are rooted in deep cravings that can only be satisfied in and by God.

The way to truly be exalted, the way to find what we’re really seeking in our quest for human exaltation is to seek exaltation in God. The way to truly get that seat in the middle of the party we’re all desperate for is to seek it from God. When we seek exaltation from God, we will find it.

Luke is ever practical. So Luke tells us exactly what it means in practice to seek exaltation from God. It’s in the second piece of teaching in our reading.

*vv. 12-14.*

The point of this is very simple – exalt others. Exalt others who could never exalt you and then you will be exalted by God.

For Luke, how we treat God is inescapably tied to how we treat those who have little. So, if you want to be exalted by God, then, when you host a party, invite people who can't invite you back.

Of course, the principle behind Jesus' teaching has much broader application. Help people who probably can't help you. Choose the people you share your time, your life, your money and your space with not on the basis of who helps you, or who makes you feel good or who might do those things in future. Choose the people who can't do anything for you.

This is so counter-cultural today. We are all constantly trying to identify who is practically advantageous for us to get to know.

As many of you know, my day job is working in academia and at conferences, everyone plays that game: walk up to someone you don't know, and it only takes five minutes to establish if they're senior or junior to you, and if they're junior to you, then there is that enormous temptation to politely disengage and find someone senior to talk to, because they can help your career more. I'm sure every profession has its equivalent. But that way of living is exalting yourself and Jesus says that whoever exalts himself will be humbled. Perhaps we could even say "will be humiliated."

The way to be exalted is to humble yourself and the way to humble yourself is to share your resources and yourself with those who have nothing to offer you.

Would we all be doing that and as we do so, would we know God exalting us now and in eternity.