

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Sept. 1/2013

Sirach 3: 17-20, 28-29; Hebrews 12: 18-19, 22-24; Luke 14: 1, 7-14

Introduction

A snobbish, well-dressed man walked into a pet shop to buy a dog. He stressed that he wanted a high-class dog, not just some run-of-the-mill pooch. The store owner said: “Here is a really well-bred dog. He’s just what you want.” The snobbish man insisted: “Are you sure this dog has a really fine pedigree?” The owner replied: “Sir, this dog is so high class that, if he could speak, he wouldn’t talk to either one of us.”

Today’s *readings* are aimed at people who think too highly of themselves. The *first* reading, from about 180 years before Christ, was aimed at Jews who had come into contact with Greek philosophy and who now thought of themselves as superior to others. The *Gospel* criticizes the conduct of some of the Pharisees. Their name means “the separated ones”, and this sometimes implied looking down on those who associated with gentiles and sinners, and who failed to observe the ritual laws concerning food. We are told they invited Jesus to a banquet, and then “watched him closely” to see if he would observe all the ritual laws in his eating. I want to comment on that Gospel passage.

It is About Humility

Someone once said that a rooster is animal that thinks the sun rises every morning so it can hear him crow. That’s a good description of a proud person, because proud persons lived in a fantasy world. They speak and act as if the world revolves around them. They lose sight of the truth of things. Humility, in contrast to this, is all about truth. It involves realizing that God is the master of all, that we live in God’s world, and that we are limited and dependent creatures. The word “humility” comes from the Latin, *humus*, which means earth. Humility brings us down to earth; it keeps us in the real world.

It is About Us

The comedian Groucho Marx was at one time admitted to membership in the very exclusive Hollywood organization, the Friar’s Club. He immediately sent them a telegram that read: “Please accept my resignation. I don’t want to belong to any club that will even accept me as a member.” That was a wonderfully humorous way of saying that it’s not just other people who have to be humble; all of us need to learn more humility.

It is easy to read today’s Gospel passage as if was just reporting to us how a particular group, the Pharisees, behaved centuries ago. Our reaction in that case might be to shake our heads and say, “Look at those proud people, scrambling for the best seats at the table.” If we look more closely, though, we will see that St. Luke has deliberately recorded this incident because he sees his fellow Christians falling into the same fault. He explicitly speaks of people invited to a *wedding banquet*. That’s a clue, so that we will recognize ourselves in this scene. For in the Bible, the wedding banquet is a symbol of eternal life, and Christians often referred to themselves as the people God has invited to that banquet. When we think of ourselves in such terms, our reaction can easily be that we have it made; all we have to do is go in and take our seats. We are in danger of forgetting who and what we are: half-converted sinners who can do nothing worthwhile without God.

It is About the Poor

In medieval Europe there was often a court jester, whose role was to give the ruler a hard time. Rulers were surrounded by people who flattered them; they could easily come to think too highly of themselves. The jester's role was to poke fun at them, to remind them that they were not superior to the common people, that they too were totally human, and that their fame and fortune could vanish like the wind. A good jester was thus a true friend to the powerful. We need to see the poor and the disadvantaged as our court jesters. They remind us of our neediness, and of the ways in which we are "poor". Seeing them makes us recall our own weak humanity, our own mortality, our total dependence on God. That is why, if we want to reach eternal life, we had best make friends with the poor. Keep them close, pay attention to them and make them our invited guests.

This lesson has never been more important than it is today. In a world where most people are poor, we North Americans and Europeans are the rich and powerful of the world. It can easily go to our head. We can forget how weak and dependent we are. If we pay attention to the poor it will bring us back to reality. It may be our road to salvation.

This lesson is also an appropriate one for a Labour Day weekend. Labour Day calls attention to the struggle so many people have to face in order to support themselves and their families with dignity. It also pays tribute to the role that the labour movement plays in enabling working people to speak and act for themselves. That is why Pope John Paul II described the labour union as "an indispensable element of social life." In a society where labour unions often receive a bad press, Catholics should support them and be active in them.

Conclusion

Years ago I listened to an older actor being interviewed. He was asked if he had any advice for aspiring young actors. "Yes," he said, "my advice is, don't ignore the people you meet on your way to the top. They're the same people you will meet on your way back down again." Great advice!