

22nd Sunday (C)

1st September 2019

‘Seats Close to Jesus’

Ecc 3: *The greater you are, the more you should behave humbly.* Ps 67: *when Your people were starved You gave them new life.* Heb 12: *what you have come to is Mt Zion, and the city of the living God.* Lk 14: *Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the man who humbles himself will be exalted.*

‘Which is the best seat at the banquet?’ — Jesus’s answer is surprising and makes us think ... “*The heart of a sensible man will reflect on parables.*”

A friend of mine once invited me to college for dinner, a formal dinner where the teaching fellows sat on a top table and the students ate on the lower tables. But that particular evening the Master of the college wasn't dining in his usual place; in fact he wasn't on high table at all; he and his wife had been invited by some students to eat down with them on the lower tables, and he had humbly accepted. The fellows were all very put out: they kept turning round and muttering ‘Good gracious, yes, the Master really is down there!’ The catering manager looked particularly worried — high table did not get the same food as the students, and that night the students, and so the Master too, were being treated to the most dried-up broad beans! But the Master and his wife were thoroughly enjoying being down there with the

students; and the students were honoured and amused by the Master’s kindly presence.

‘Which is the best seat?’ Well, on that evening it certainly wasn't the top table, where all the conversation would have been cutting criticism of the Master, so demeaning himself. No, the best seats were those on the table with the Master — humble benches, with the world’s driest broad beans, but a lot of laughter and a lot of kindness.

‘Which is the best seat?’ The answer that evening is like the answer of Jesus’s parable — the best seat is not so much determined by how high up it is as by who’s sitting nearby. So, where would Jesus be sitting? “*The greater you are, the more you should behave humbly,*” says the first reading; and since Jesus is the greatest, He has behaved the most humbly. He gave up His seat at the right hand of God the Father Almighty to sit around in the dust of Galilee’s streets, teaching, and at awkward meals with the leading Pharisees, eating, and treating all as equals, so as to get across the message: ‘the best seat is not the one you might

imagine.’ No, the best seat is the one next to Jesus, because that’s where they’re talking about things that matter; that’s where regardless of social class we’re all ordinary people together, learning from Our extraordinary Lord; it’s where you are honoured by the living presence of God Himself.

So, where’s the best seat this Sunday morning? It is, of course, right here in this church at Mass, sitting close to Jesus. It’s far better than sitting snacking in front of the television, or sitting in the car on the way to the pub lunch, or sitting by the river with a champagne picnic — all these things are fine, but not at a quarter past 9/11 this Sunday morning. Because here is the best conversation, the best food, the best company: our readings and our prayers are our conversation with Jesus; His body and Blood is our food of divine life; our companions here, whoever they may be, are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

And to choose to sit here at this banquet with Jesus does require humility, because on earth seats with Jesus are not very exalted. It especially requires intellectual humility, to accept that we are creatures and that God is our Creator,

so that it’s completely OK that we can’t always fathom out His ways. But we trust faithfully that what He speaks is loving and true, so that to sit here, humbly, as He asks, in seats close to Jesus, is the best preparation for the heavenly banquet. There, Jesus has returned to His throne of glory, and one day will say to you, “My friend, move up higher,” and you will be able to say, ‘Yes, Lord, I recognize Your voice, I recognize Your food, I recognize Your company ... and humbly, Lord, I take my seat close to You for ever.’