

Make me humble, Lord!

22nd Sunday of the Year – Cycle C – September 1, 2019

Readings: Sir 3:17-18,20,28-29; Heb 12:18-19,22-24a; Lk 14:1,7-14

“The greater you are, the more you should behave humbly” (Sirach)

Three Scriptural Signposts

1. Today’s readings can be seen from the viewpoint of *humility*. The author of the Book of Sirach or Ecclesiasticus was a wise and pious Jew who lived about 200 BC. He wrote to exhort his fellow-Jews to live their lives in conformity to the calls and commands of the Covenant which God had made with them. He desired that they strengthen their ties with God and with all other human beings. To do this, one has to be meek and humble. What exactly is humility? Humility is not synonymous with an inferiority complex. Humility is neither degrading myself nor belittling myself. It is not thinking little of myself but rather not thinking of myself at all. And, if I don’t think of myself at all, then like a little jasmine, oblivious of its beauty, my fragrance will waft outwards towards other people and towards God. The author’s tone is paternal, affectionate and indicative of concern: “My son, perform your tasks in meekness; then you will be loved by those whom God accepts.” The humble person “finds favour with the Lord” not because God’s favour is a reward for humility, but because humility means abandoning self-assertion so that God may act unconstrained in our lives. And God *does*, unfailingly, mould the humble human heart according to delightful divine designs.
2. In the gospel, when Jesus goes to dine at the house of a prominent Pharisee, “they were *watching him* closely.” This ‘watching’ was neither out of admiration nor affection but rather with the intent of ‘catching him’ transgressing some rule or regulation. For them, Mosaic Law was the ultimate for assessing one’s goodness and holiness. Thus, they prided themselves for their strictest observation of this Law. Consequently, their pride and holier-than-thou attitudes were seen in matters big and small like taking important seats at dinner-tables, occupying privileged positions in synagogues, and parading around the temple precincts to post themselves pompously in positions of prestige. Jesus condemns this Pharisaic attitude of ego-inflation and self-absorption leading to a denial of God’s greatness and graciousness. The attitude of the Pharisees would give one the impression that they neither had need of God nor of God’s grace. God could be dispensed with. Jesus teaches them practical lessons in humility: “Go and sit in the lowest place,” and you will be honoured in public; for those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.
3. Besides the guests, the host, too, needed some advice. Being a “leader of the Pharisees” the host must’ve been a wealthy and well-connected Pharisee who would certainly have invited only the rich and powerful, as well as the so-considered ‘pure’ and ‘chosen ones’. These guests would undoubtedly have the means to repay their host by either inviting him to their dinner-parties in return or by recompensing him in some way or the other. Jesus says: “Do not invite your friends or your brethren or your relatives or rich neighbours” (who have the means to repay or reward you); but instead “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame

and the blind”. These cannot repay you (now); but you will receive your reward in heaven because your charity was based not on selfish calculations and conditions but on true love for God and for your neighbour.

Linking the Second Reading to the Theme:

In an indirect way the second reading from Hebrews also speaks of a ‘movement in humility’, so to say. The author traces a movement from Law to Gospel, from Mount Sinai (Moses) to Zion (Jesus), from self-righteousness to self-resignation. In this movement, the true believer lets go of ‘self’ and gets totally absorbed in ‘The Self’: God. This is the essence of the “new covenant” spoken of.

Two Current Concerns:

“I” Concern: Our world is obsessed with pampering the self. Everyone attempts to put oneself at the centre, exalting oneself to the maximum. Today, we not only have beauty treatment for women but also pedicure and manicure for men. What we desperately need is ‘*headicure*’ to mould our swollen heads into receptacles of divine wisdom.

Identity Concern: Humility comes from the Latin *humus*, meaning soil or mud. Like a potter, God moulded me out of the clay of the earth (Gen 2:7) and I’ll truly be blessed if I realize my true identity; namely, that I am dust and unto dust I shall return. Sadly, Adam’s sin was that of hubris – failure to differentiate between who God is and who Man is.

Appropriate Anecdote:

An arrogant American musician once visited the house of the great composer Beethoven, sat down at the piano and proudly began to play Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata*. When he had finished, he said to the concierge, “I suppose many celebrities come here?” “Yes,” replied the man, “Paderewski was here last week.” The American continued, “And, did he play on this piano too?” “No,” said the old concierge, “He said he wasn’t worthy.” Ignacy Jan Paderewski (1860-1941) was a brilliant Polish pianist, composer, orator, writer, social worker and philosopher who eventually became Prime Minister of Poland in 1919. He was deeply humble and is a model of what today’s readings exhort us *to be*. On another occasion, Paderewski met a famous polo player who said, “We’re both leaders in our spheres, though they are very different.” “Not so different,” quipped Paderewski, “You’re a dear soul who plays polo, and I’m a poor Pole who plays solo!” Besides being humble, he was wise and witty, too! Truly great people are always humble because of their deep awareness of who God is and who they are.

In Lighter Vein: The song “O Lord, it’s hard to be humble’ by Mac Davis expresses the exact opposite mindset of what is central to today’s reading. . . . Here are the words: “O Lord, it’s hard to be humble when you’re perfect in every way, I can’t wait to look in the mirror ‘cause I get better looking each day. To know me is to love me, I must be hell of a man, O Lord, it’s hard to be humble, but I’m doing the best that I can!”

Prayer: Like singer Mac Davis, do we not sometimes feel it’s hard to be humble? Therefore, let’s kneel upon the soil of the earth and learn humility from Him who said, “Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart” (Mt 11:29) . . . and, let us pray, “Lord, teach me to be like You—meek and humble of heart, Amen.”
