

**This Sunday's Readings – the 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time** – It is very easy to see the connection between today's first reading from Sirach and the Gospel reading from Luke. The main theme is humility.

The first reading is taken from the Book of Sirach, which is also known by two other names – The Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sira (Sirach is the Greek form of this name) and Ecclesiasticus (Latin for Church Book). The St. Charles Borromeo Bible Study on Picayune, MS, explains why it was called the “Church Book” – “It received this name from the fact that, after the Psalms, it was the book most used in the liturgy; in fact, in the early Church it was a kind of official catechism used in the catechumenate”. The Book of Sirach was written in Hebrew sometime after 200 BC and translated into Greek around 132 BC and is part of the Deutero-canonical Books of the Bible or Second Canon. These books are only recognized by the Catholic Church. This book is also unique in that it is the only biblical book that identifies its author. Sirach was a wise sage and priest who lived in Jerusalem and who was steeped in the law and in the prophets. This particular section from chapter 3 is a short dissertation on humility. In today's culture, humility is not only misunderstood but is often thought of as weakness. As we read in Sirach, it is just the opposite. As Sirach says – “Humble yourself the more, the greater you are” – and most importantly – “you will find favor with God”. The word humility comes from the Latin word *humus*, which means earth. We all came from the earth and will return to the earth. Fr. Roger Karban in his 1998 syndicated column adds this comment on today's first reading – “As a proponent of wisdom, Sirach the teacher spent a lifetime discovering God's presence in the world -- a presence which reveals God's plan for him (Sir 3:17-18, 20, 28-29). As he points out in Sunday's first reading, some of God's actions are above our understanding, 'too sublime' for us, 'things beyond (our) strength.' Yet Sirach knows God also is responsible for other actions, actions we can understand. It's with those actions that he and his students are concerned. And it's in the quest of the meaning of those actions that he gives the following two directives:

- First, God's actions can be understood only by those individuals who are honest about themselves. "Conduct your affairs in humility," he writes. "Humble yourselves the more, the greater you are." If we don't make honest attempts to understand who we are, how can we possibly understand what God wants of us?
- Second, in order to appreciate God's design for us and our world, our lives must revolve around others. "Water quenches a flaming fire," Sirach observes, "and alms atone for sin." Along with all our sacred authors, Sirach believes that we primarily discover God in relationships”.

In the Gospel reading from Luke, we again see Jesus at a banquet table. The image of the banquet table is unique to Luke. This time Jesus is dining with the Pharisees, who restrict their invitations to dine to only a choice few. The guests are jockeying for the best positions at the table. Jesus takes this opportunity to teach them a lesson on humility through a parable. This parable can be found only in Luke's Gospel. This is not a lesson on social etiquette but about the Kingdom of God. In short, do not go to the head of the table, lest there is one greater than you in attendance and you will have to go to a lesser position and be humiliated. As Jesus said – “For every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted”. Also the banquet table of

the Pharisees is in direct contrast to the heavenly banquet of God, where all are invited and all are welcomed. Note what Jesus says – “Rather, when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous”. Remember that the Pharisees also believed in resurrection. Fr. Roger Karban in his 1998 syndicated column further comments on this – “The resurrection -- His and ours -- is now the focus point, not worldly honors. Because we believe Jesus is alive among us, the poor and helpless are the most important people in the world, not the rich and famous. It's especially in our relationship with the world's most helpless that we come upon the risen Jesus”.

Unless we understand the cultural aspects of today's Gospel reading, we cannot fully understand its true meaning. John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle C* explains – “In Jesus' Mediterranean world meals were very powerful means of communication. Above all, meals affirmed and gave legitimacy to a person's role and status in a given community. For this reason, most meals in antiquity were attended by people of the same social rank. The fact that the ruler of the Pharisees invited Jesus to dine at his house indicates that the Pharisees accepted Jesus as a social equal.

#### HOSTILITY

The host and his guests were “watching” Jesus closely. The word used here and elsewhere in Luke (6:7; 20:20) implies “hostile observation.” They hope to catch him in a shortcoming of some sort. The apparently “honorable” invitation is actually hypocritical. Behavior at these meals is very important. Everyone watches whether one washes (11:38); who eats what, when, and where (6:4); what is done or omitted at table (7:38, 40, 44, 49); who is invited (14:12-14); where people sit (14:7-11); with whom one eats (15:2); and in what order persons of different rank come to the table (17:7-8). Jesus responds to this hostile observation by telling them a parable. A parable always means something the same and something other. The storyteller challenges the listeners to identify the “other.”

#### TRUE HONOR AGAIN

Accepting an invitation to dinner in the ancient Mediterranean world obligated a guest to return the favor. It was not uncommon for guests to decline the invitation, especially if they realized that returning the favor was more than they could or cared to handle (see Luke 14:15-24). Crass as this may seem to modern Western believers; this practice of reciprocity was a key factor in the economic life of equals in Jesus' day. I do you a favor; you do me a favor—endlessly. This basic rule of behavior guided every host in drawing up the guest list. Jesus' advice to his host (v. 12) is not only rude and insulting but also shocking. It is extremely bad manners for a guest to tell a host how to be a host! Moreover, inviting people who cannot return the favor is viewed as cultural suicide. Such guests—the poor, crippled, lame, and blind (v. 13)—are clearly people of a lower social status than the host. To associate with such is to dishonor one's own status. One's social equals will then shun future invitations, and a host of means will be socially ruined.

Jesus, however, paints another picture of “true” honor. It is not human judgment, the return invitation, that determines honor. God determines true honor, and at the resurrection of the righteous, God personally will reward and honor the host who has been gracious to those unable to return an invitation. This statement surely stung the Pharisees, who believed in the resurrection (Acts 23:6). Having set a trap for Jesus, they are themselves trapped by Jesus, whose teachings truly turn the world upside-down (see Acts 17:6”).

Joe Juellich, Liturgy Team