

As we read through the gospels, it becomes very clear that much of Jesus' ministry was centered around meals, with the last supper being a great example, as well as the gospel reading that we've just heard. That's not too surprising, as much of our lives revolves around food and meals and our social life. You hear people saying, "Well, let's grab a coffee." Or "Come around for tea." Or "Let's do lunch." What you eat, who you eat it with, and where you eat suggest something about your identity, your community, and your social standing. In the gospel set for today, at the meal that Jesus was partaking in was at the house of the leader of the Pharisees. Jesus used that occasion to teach a lesson on humility. He ends the lesson by saying "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled. And those who humble themselves will be exalted." It's not easy to teach about humility.

There's a very famous Englishman, he's died now, but he was Lord Longford. He wrote a book on the subject of humility. He said this about it. I wasn't sure at first whether he was being ironic or not. "In 1969, I published a small book on humility. It was a pioneering work, which has not to my knowledge been superseded." Sadly, I don't think he was being ironic because I read this in 1994 in his autobiography. "I still feel today that anyone who is seriously interested in the concept of humility would benefit from reading my little book."

Lord Longford is here reminding me of the famous Russian rabbi who lived to a great age. He was on his deathbed, and his students came round to bid him a final farewell. One said, "Oh, master, what will we do when we lose your great piety? Who will teach us to pray?" Another one said, "What about your teaching? Who is going to open up the scriptures to us when you've gone?" A third one said, "Your great ethical teaching? Who is going to tell us what is right and what is wrong?" Well, the rabbi opened his eyes, sat up in bed and said, "You say all this, and you say nothing about my humility?" Humility is like underwear. You should have it, but not let it show.

Jesus was much more successful than Lord Longford, teaching about humility as he lived out his message. He backed up his words with the example of the life that he lived. In our epistle from Philippians, St. Paul writes beautifully there on this subject of humility. In the first few verses, he sets out some principles for

recognizing humility when we see it. He identifies it as doing nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, regarding others as better than ourselves and looking to the interests of others before looking to our own interests. Then he goes on in more poetic fashion in the second part of the reading. He focuses there on how Jesus lived.

I want to draw out two key elements of Jesus' humility that St. Paul identifies in those magnificent verses. The first characteristic is to do with identity. Jesus had a strong sense of who he was and his humility was directly came out of this foundational self-understanding that he possessed. He knew himself to be in the form of God. That is to say he was of God but he did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped. Warren Bennis, the leadership guru, writes this. "Humble people are notable for their self-possession. They know who they are, have healthy egos, and take more pride in what they do than in who they are." Jesus was free from that terrible tendency that we all have to a greater or lesser extent to feel the need to construct our own identity. It's that tendency which lies behind Jesus's comments in the gospel about who we're to invite to lunch or to dinner. Who we eat with contributes to our sense of self, makes a big contribution, which is a phenomenon and a process which begins early in life.

I remember clearly at school, the anguish we would go through every lunchtime to work out where we sat. There was a table where the cool guys would sit at, and then were we invited to sit there? Could we just join? Or do we just join the pecking order of tables that ran down from the cool jocks to the table for those who were interested in computers? Of course, those were the guys who had the last laugh because all the cool jocks are now hobbling around on damaged knees and the computer geeks, they've all made a fortune. Jesus recognized that the Pharisees wanted to have dinner with the rich and influential because they wanted to create that sense of being rich and influential themselves. You are who you eat with. Jesus, in contrast with the Pharisees, was not trying to construct his identity. He was not trying to build a sense of self. He had that strong sense of who he was in God. He was comfortable with who he was. He had no problem eating other

meals, in fact, most of these other meals with those the Pharisees labeled tax collectors and sinners.

The word humble comes from the Greek word hummus, which means earth or clay. It speaks to me of that image in the Bible of us being clay pots in God's hands. St. Paul says, he develops the image in his writings, and says "we are clay pots with treasure within", which I think is a wonderful way of understanding ourselves. We are clay pots with treasure within. That's an image that speaks both to our preciousness and also to our ordinariness. We can go either way on that scale. We can either be too aware of ourselves as treasure or too down on ourselves as being aware of our ordinariness. We can go to either extreme. But the image that St. Paul hands us of clay pots with treasure within holds those two extremes together. Yes, there's an ordinary about us, but it's also true that we have treasure within, that we are uniquely made.

We are God's creation, God's children. We don't need to construct any other identity. That's where we should begin. Christian humility begins with recognizing who we are in God and finding our true identity there. Then we can live that life of humility that Jesus calls us to.

The second characteristic of Jesus's humility that St. Paul draws out in his epistle is trust. St. Paul writes "God highly exalted Jesus and gave him the name above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend". Jesus was humble enough, confident enough in his own identity, not to feel the need to exalt himself, to push himself forward. He entrusted himself to the safe keeping of God. He put himself in his father God's hands. He prayed on the night before he died, "Not my will be done, but yours." He trusted his father, and that trust was well placed, as at the right time, God highly exalted him. Jesus was lifted up into heaven's highest place.

Interestingly, that word exalted appears also in our gospel reading. "Those who humble themselves," Jesus says, "will be exalted". They will be moved up the pecking order to sit at the place in heaven of highest honor. I think that Jesus in this gospel is actually speaking literally. I think he's literally telling the Pharisees how they should behave at a wedding

banquet, but I also think that his teaching here has a broader, more general application.

It can also be read as saying something about how we are to live our lives. We don't need to be constantly putting up a pretense that we are better or holier than we really are. We don't have to curate or construct our identity. We don't have to persuade God that we really are lovable and worthy of His attention. We have to be humble enough to trust God and to put ourselves into His hands. We're not called to trust in ourselves, in our own worthiness or abilities. Instead, we are called to trust in the God who loves us unconditionally and has a plan for us. We can trust our lives to Him. We can stand back in a way because God is working His purposes out. As St. Peter said in one of his letters, God will lift us up in due time. Our anxious scramble for greatness will only lead to more anxiety, more desperation, more loneliness. Better to trust God, the great reverser of our priorities, our hierarchies, and our values.

I want to sum up what I've been saying about humility with a story that was a favorite of Martin Luther, the great German Reformation theologian. He used to tell this story of two mountain goats who met on a very narrow ledge. I don't think goats are terribly good at going backwards. This was a serious situation because on one side of this very narrow ledge was a sheer drop. And on the other side was a sheer cliff. There was nowhere really for them to go. There wasn't room for them to go round each other. How did they solve this dilemma? Well, of course they could have fought. They could have butted horns. But according to Luther, they had more sense than that. They showed more humility. One of them laid down on the path and allowed the other goat to walk over it to safety. Of course in that way, they were both safe. That is the way of humility. This is the way that Jesus modeled for us. It's the way he calls us to follow. Amen.