

Sunday 1st September 2019, Trinity XI

Proverbs 25:6-7; Luke 14:1,7-14

Standing in the Place of the Great

The Bible is a very wide-ranging book, or to be more precise, a very wide ranging library.

Its sixty six books cover all manner of things. There are books of history in both the Old and New Testament sections. There are hymns, in what we call the book of Psalms. There are laws – plenty of laws, for the most precisely defined situations. There are stories which might even have been intended from the word go as fiction: Jonah and the whale, Ruth and Naomi, Daniel and the lion's den. There is bleak existential despair in the book of Ecclesiastes.

And then there's Proverbs, from which we had our first reading today. Proverbs, which kicks off with some of the most beautiful and profound reflections on the nature of wisdom and God for a good ten chapters, but then serves up twenty more of, well, proverbs. Little pieces of wisdom, of skill for navigating life. We think it was a kind of instruction manual for young men wanting to make their mark in society, perhaps especially in the royal court. It's all about how to conduct yourself: very practical things like looking after your money, working hard, and how to make the right impression at banquets. Don't push yourself forward in the presence of the King, the wise man says. Don't take stand in the place of the great ones. How humiliating would it be if you were asked to move down? Better by far to wait to be noticed, to be ushered up.

Jesus says the same thing, pretty much word for word, in today's Gospel reading. He's an invited guest in the home of a Pharisee, and he's watching how the other guests are carefully arranging themselves, making sure everyone is in the appropriate seat, that everyone has found their correct level. Near to the centre, close to the host, for those with most honour: the more junior or less successful out at the margins. Jesus says what Proverbs said: best in such a situation to exercise caution. Take a low seat and wait to be asked up higher. That's how to play the social hierarchy game.

Unsurprisingly though there's a bit more here than just that kind of advice. Remember first that Jesus asks people to imagine they've been invited to a wedding feast – not just any old feast, but a wedding feast. Why does that matter? Well, because again and again in the Gospels the wedding feast serves as an image for the Kingdom of God. It's as if God and his world are going to get married, fused together in one explosion of joy. Well, says Jesus, if you're invited to that wedding, don't assume you're first on the list. Don't head instantly for the place of honour. There might be all sorts of other people ahead of you.

And Jesus says this at the dining table of a Pharisee. Of, that is, one of the people in Israel who was most keen on emphasising that it was *Israel* that was invited to God's feast, not the rest of the world. And not *all* Israel either, but only *true* Israel. Only Israel that did things right, that really followed God's ways, would be in the Kingdom, thought the Pharisee. And Jesus warns them, no, that's not how it is. All sorts of people you don't expect to be there will be. All sorts of impure, lax, sinful Jews and even Gentiles will be there. You can't begin to imagine how many people God has invited, and you will be staggered at how cavalier he is about who He's letting in.

And that warning to the Pharisees is a warning to us. It's a warning to everyone who might think that through being religious, through being good, they've made themselves God's kind of people, the kind of people he'd really want in his Kingdom. When we wake up in the Kingdom, we will find all sorts of surprising people there, who we are quite sure really shouldn't be. I wouldn't go so far as to say that simply *everyone* will be there – Jesus never said that, not at all. But it is difficult to overestimate the sheer extravagance of grace, the sheer scale of salvation that God has planned for his world. All sorts will find themselves swept up in it, to our and no doubt their surprise.

To which one response would be to say: okay ... so then this Gospel lesson is about knowing our place: about realising that actually we are no great shakes, and that getting to the wedding feast, to the Kingdom, is not a matter of our being really good and special, but just about the grace of God. Well yes, but there's something more to be said too, which we don't focus on enough. And it's this:

Being a Christian is not just about being humble. Don't stand in the place of the great, says Proverbs – but actually, when you think about it, being a Christian is *precisely* about standing in the place of the great. In the place of the greatest One of all, Jesus Christ. The New Testament tries to say one central thing in so many ways - that being a Christian is not just about thinking that Jesus of Nazareth was a really good example or teacher, and doing your best to follow him. It's not even about thinking that He is still alive and that He can be your friend. Those things are true, of course, but they're not at the heart of Christianity. The heart of Christianity is much more mysterious: it's about Jesus' life and our lives somehow becoming *one*. That's what receiving communion is all about – as the prayer puts it, that he may live in us, and we in him. Or as the eucharistic prayer has it, all our relating to God happens 'through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit.' We stand in the place of the great one. It's why we get to call God 'Father'. It's why we get to say, and mean, 'We thank you for counting us *worthy* to stand in your presence' – *worthy*, we who are anything but, considered in ourselves. But the entire point of the Gospel is that we are *not* considered in ourselves, we're considered as we are in Jesus, the Great One who has drawn us into Himself, who lets us stand in his place.

So in a way this Gospel *is* saying: know your place. But usually when people say that they mean, 'don't get above yourself. Remember just how junior and unimportant you are.' When the Gospel says it, it at least as much means, remember quite how astonishing your place is. Your place is the highest imaginable, it is beyond imaginable, it is seated at the right hand of God the Father, all caught up in Christ. You will be glory *far beyond* what you could even begin to merit. But you will only have it insofar as you remember it comes to you as gift, and not as earned reward. You can't impress God. You can't make yourself necessary or beneficial to him. He swoops you up in Jesus and makes you stand in the place of the great not because you're impressive, but because you're loved.

And from all this flows the changed kind of behaviour Jesus goes onto describe. If God swooping you up has nothing to do with your talents, your gifts, your ability to impress Him – well, something of that should spill into how we deal with each other. Who are our friends? Who do we include in our lives? It is so easy, is it not, just to be with people who are like us – or with people who have lots to offer: who are witty, attractive, easy, intelligent, prosperous. People who, one way or another, earn our friendship. Who *deserve* it. Well, says the Gospel, that needs to change. God doesn't make people earn their place. He takes those who can give him nothing – people like you and me – and he puts them in the place of the great. And then he says, well, pass it on. Go and do likewise. Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind, those who cannot repay. You'll know who they are, they're the ones you've tended to ignore or even despise. The difficult child, the smelly man, the drunk, the failure, the bigot. Welcome them into your life, says God, as you have been welcomed into mine.

That's what being great means. It is all about grace: receiving grace, and giving grace. Not deserving it, and not waiting for others to deserve it. May our gracious God fill us with grace, and through us fill the world. Amen.