

22nd Sunday of the Year, Year C

The setting for today's Gospel is a meal. Jesus is telling us how we should behave at a meal and who we should invite. We have come here today in response to Jesus' invitation to be with him at this Eucharistic meal, so the Gospel is about us. Jesus has invited us, not because we are worthy, but because we are poor: we do not have the resources to meet our own needs, especially our deepest need which is for meaning in our life, the meaning given by his love. We are crippled: life's hurts, the way others have treated us and our own mistakes and sins have crippled us. We are lame: we cannot walk the path of life without the support and inspiration of grace. We are blind: we cannot see where we are going; we cannot see how we are going to cope; we have little understanding of ourselves and we frequently misjudge others.

This is not intended to put myself or you or anyone else down. It is intended as a description of the human condition. Like the rest of the living organisms on this planet we are quite fragile and very dependent on our environment. As humans the most important factor in our environment is love, which comes to us in a number of ways but always has its origin in God. We are blessed if we know it, accept it and open ourselves to the gracious love of God who sustains us in life, who knows our deepest longings - what Gerard Manley Hopkins calls: 'the dearest freshness deep down things'. In His love, God draws us into ever more intimate communion with himself, the source of life. Jesus does what he tells us to do. He invites the poor the crippled the lame and the blind, and we come as we are to this Eucharistic banquet.

I'd like to take you, this morning, through two passages of the New Testament that describe who we are when we assemble here for the Sunday Eucharist. The first is from the Book of Revelation, also called the Apocalypse, and the second is this morning's Second Reading.

In his Introduction, before giving the message of the risen Jesus to the churches, the author of the Apocalypse describes the presence (we say the *real* presence) of Jesus in the assembly. Using visionary, symbolic, language, he writes: 'I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day'(that is today, Sunday) ... and I saw seven golden lamp stands'(1:10,13). He sees with his mind's eye. It is a perception of faith, an inspired insight, the fruit of mature reflection and he is referring to the seven church communities in the area of Ephesus. Let us imagine ourselves as one of the golden lamp stands.

He goes on: 'In the midst of the lamp stands I saw one like the Son of Man clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest'. The risen Jesus is dressed as a priest. The gold symbolises his divinity. 'His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow'. The white symbolises the luminous splendour the glorified Jesus, radiating God's glory. 'His eyes were like a flame of fire.' Filled with a burning love, but also seeing who we really are and burning into us in order to purify us for love. 'His feet were like brass, refined as in a furnace'. Jesus has conquered death and stands triumphant and invincible. 'His voice was like the sound of many waters.' There is power in his words and like the ocean crashing on the shore, he will not be silenced. 'In his right hand he held seven stars'. This assembly and the other assemblies that make up our local church are held in his hand, resplendent with light, like stars in the night sky. 'From his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword and his face was like the sun shining with full force'.

We recall Paul's image of the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus (see 2Corinthians 4:6). In his conclusion, the author of the Apocalypse speaks of the community assembled for the Sunday Eucharist as the Bride of Christ coming into the bridal chamber prepared to enjoy the love of our divine Spouse, for, indeed, the Eucharist is a love banquet. So we remind ourselves that Jesus is really present here. He is present first and foremost in us as an assembled people, for we are his Body, living by his Spirit. He is present secondly in the various ministers who act as icons, representing him and giving him voice. We think of the priest who is the sacrament of Jesus, gathering his people, speaking to us and accepting our offerings. We think of the Readers who are sacraments of Jesus giving voice to his Word. We think of the Eucharistic Ministers, sacraments of Jesus giving himself to us to nourish us. We think of those who minister to us with their music and their voices, sacraments of Jesus lifting our hearts to join him in praising his Father and rejoicing in his love. And thirdly, we believe that God accepts our offering and, through the power of his Spirit, our gifts of bread and wine are transformed into the real presence of the risen Jesus who gives himself to us to nourish us on our journey. Whether we are wrapped in silent awe, acknowledging the wonderful mystery of which we are part, or whether we converse with each other in joy at our shared faith and life, let us not forget who we are and why we have come together.

Today's Second Reading is taken from the Letter to the Hebrews. It has the same theme. The author reminds his readers of the experience of the people of Israel assembled on Mount Sinai when God came down on the mountain and revealed his glory in thunder and lightning and the blast of trumpets, overwhelming the assembly with fear. He goes on to describe how especially privileged we are. Gone is the fear. We are in the presence, as he says, of 'millions of angels gathered for the festival'. Each one of us, through our baptism, has been given a share in the life of Jesus and in the intimate love which Jesus has with his Father. We are citizens of heaven. Our home is with God and we are part of the communion of saints. They are all here gathered with us and praying for us and encouraging us to continue living in such a way that we will join them when our journey is ended. Like the author of the Book of Revelation, he reminds us of the real presence in our midst of Jesus, our priest-mediator.

The Responsorial Psalm picks up the theme. It is an exultant hymn celebrating the Exodus, the entrance into the Promised Land and the presence of God in the temple of Jerusalem. We are reminded that God hears the cry of the poor and cares for those who are abandoned. We are being invited to express our joy that God has come to us in Jesus and has loved us into life, freeing us from slavery to all that oppresses us, making us members of his body the Church, and truly present here inviting us to this wedding banquet.

Today's readings have advice for us on what our response should be to the amazing grace that God is showering upon us. The First Reading reminds us that we are to be humble – a beautiful virtue that flows from recognising that everything we have is a gift and that finds expression in gratitude. We are also called to be gentle with others, accepting them as we accept ourselves in their brokenness and being gracious to them. If we think that these virtues are beyond us we are reminded in the Gospel Acclamation that these are qualities of Jesus who is 'gentle and humble of heart'. When he comes to us in communion he comes to share these beautiful qualities with us. Jesus himself in the Gospel tells us to welcome the poor, the crippled the lame and the blind. We are all those things and we have been welcomed. Should we not reach out to others who share our human condition. It is together that we become Church.