

Homily for St Johns Opening Mass 2018

For many years I kept a knife in the top draw of my desk at home. It was not for use in case of an intruder! It was given to me by a young man who came to me to ask about getting married. The girl he was going with was a Catholic and her love for him had forced him to question his life. He was from an early age very street wise. He had been involved in quite a few street fights and petty crime with the gang he hung around with. So now he wanted to get married and to do so he felt he should be baptised too just like his girl friend. I could easily have been a bit wary of him, an obvious thug as he seemed to be to me at the time. But without any prompting from me he produced his knife from his pocket. For one anxious moment I feared he might use it on me! The knife was precious to him and had stood him well in fights. He said he would give me the knife as a pledge of his genuine desire to change. He would put his past behind him. What could I do? What could I say? What would Jesus say? He might say to him "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." So I baptised him. And I treasured the old worn knife. He was making a real sacrifice for his girl friend. Not just his knife. But his very life as he had lived it so far. He must have been going through a real transformation. He was asking himself what his life was all about. It was humbling for him to give up the prestige of the power he held over others that his knife represented.

It was humbling for me as well. It was a real challenge to me at the time to receive his sincere request made in such a dramatic way. It has coloured the way I listen to people who come seeking help. Often our preconceived ideas and fears can stop us encountering the other as a real person.

Jesus tells the guests at a dinner a parable. Now God did not become flesh in Christ just to teach us good table manners or what is courteous behaviour at a party however good that may be. When we hear Jesus is going to tell a parable that is a signal that he is going to say something about the Kingdom of God. And in saying something about the Kingdom of God he is saying a great deal about God. Here we discover that God is not who we thought he was. God is in this ordinary human being Jesus of Nazareth. God does not run the world as we would like to if we were god.

The story is not about putting oneself down in order that one might be promoted, a false humility. Nor manipulating a situation to our own advantage. That could happen but that is not what it is about. The key to the parable, I think, is the last bit. When you throw a party he says don't just invite your friends and those who would praise you. Invite the poor the crippled the lame and the blind. That is one suggestion of Jesus that I find very hard to follow.

Who do we invite to our table, our games? Only those we like, or get along with usually. We don't want an uncomfortable experience as we share a meal or some event with strangers. That is a great challenge. Taken literally that is difficult if not impossible most of the time for most of us. And that is the point.

Because this parable is about God first of all. That is just what God does. God invites everyone. That is the kind of God Jesus reveals. Unlike us, who are always making distinctions, judgements and condemnations, God shows no partiality. We all share this one small earth. We all come from the earth and return to the earth. We have nothing to boast about in that respect. And we all share this table today. It is God who is the host at the dinner. We have to be humble enough to let God be the host and welcome us to his table. It is God who affirms us so that we never need be shamed. With that as our foundation in life God can do amazing things through us.

This Eucharistic table today is, in a ritual way, doing the same thing as the parable. We are saying as we come to communion that we want to be as hospitable, as forgiving, as just and compassionate, as God is to all people. It is God who has invited us. Whenever we are like that even in the smallest way the Kingdom of God is near.

In that way as St Paul said we receive the grace to "lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called." St Benedict and the Good Samaritan Sisters lived this kind of humility before God. It is their spirit which lives on in St Johns.

Fr Graham