

Just before the meal begins Jesus turns aside to heal a man suffering from dropsy or oedema (a build up of fluids in the body indicative of a variety of diseases) and then takes his place, presumably, at table or triclinium – a table surrounded by couches on three sides. The Pharisees are watching him but he's also watching them and notices how some of the guests have already picked the places of honour; those nearest the host where they could converse with the more important people – in their eyes- more easily. Where Jesus sits or has been placed is not revealed – he's already challenged the host and the other guests by healing on the Sabbath and perhaps discomfited them. Where should we put this troublesome man? But now he discomfits them further by attacking their sense of self- regard to the exclusion of others. He does get to sit down as the conversation continues with one of those who sat at table with him but the narrative is essentially being used by Luke as a means of communicating Jesus' radical reassertion of everyone's equality before God – it's a turning of the tables so to speak, every bit as disturbing as that turning over of the tables in the Temple precincts which in John's gospel becomes the proximate cause of his death. We too should feel discomfited by his words and actions because it raises the question of our own self- regard before God and one another or, better, before one another and God, because how we view one another is how we view God. Now that is uncomfortable because I keep coming across people, not here of course, who I really don't like, or parts of them irritate me, or I feel obliged to judge as part of my job – preserving correct boundaries etc, keeping other people safe and I'm never too sure where to go with this. It's an issue at the monastery because we attract the very poor as well as the very rich and it's easy to give the latter more attention than their due or, as the Rule of St Benedict puts it:

*“It is in the welcome given to the poor and the strangers that special attention should be paid, because in them Christ is more truly received; for in the case of the wealthy the awe they inspire itself ensures respect”. (RB 53)* But is it possible also to give the poor more attention than their due? Who to invite, who not to invite? We do seem to have a natural tendency towards a pecking order and this has even been codified in some form in the ways monasteries have been ordered – those in first having a certain priority over those who come in later and one hears a subtle extension of this among the many guests and associates who come to us. When did you first come to Turvey and so on? We invariably place each other on a spectrum. But the Rule also allows for the breaking of such rules – the elevation to a higher place of someone who came in later but has special gifts or, if the Abbot sees that their life deserves it.(RB61) What Jesus I think is after is not necessarily anti- establishment or even anti-hierarchy but anti-pride where we forget in all our posturing that God has made each and everyone of us in God's own image and our problem isn't firstly about where to sit or stand but about the regard we have for one another wherever we sit or stand. Self-regard is enormously inhibiting in this respect, it closes us down to God's presence not only in others but in ourselves. It is in essence a radical call to holiness where the person within us who judges others becomes the God who judges all – with love. This can only happen if we leave a place at our table for God, for the Spirit, for the Christ who does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

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