

22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday (C)

28<sup>th</sup> August 2022

‘Seats close to Jesus’

Ecc 3: *The greater you are, the more you should behave humbly.*

Ps 67: *when Your people were starved You gave them new life.*

Heb 12: *what you have come to is Mt Zion, and the city of the living God.*

Lk 14: *Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the man who humbles himself will be exalted.*

‘Which is the best seat at the banquet?’ — Jesus’s answer is surprising and makes us think ... “*The heart of a sensible man will reflect on parables,*” says the 1<sup>st</sup> reading ...

A university friend of mine often used to invite me to her college for dinner, a semi-formal dinner where the teaching fellows sat on a top table and the students ate on the lower tables. But one particular evening the Master of the college wasn't dining in his usual place; in fact he wasn't on high table at all; he and his wife had been invited by some students to eat down with them on the lower tables, and he had humbly accepted. The fellows were all very put out: they kept turning round and perhaps muttering ‘Good gracious, yes, the Master really is down there!’ The catering manager looked particularly worried — high table did not get the same food as the students, and that night the students, and so the Master too, were being

treated to the most dried-up broad beans! But the Master and his wife were thoroughly enjoying being down there with the students; and the students were honoured and amused by the Master’s kindly presence.

‘Which is the best seat?’ Well, on that evening it certainly wasn't the top table, where no doubt the conversation would have been cutting criticism of the Master, “so demeaning himself.” No, the best seats were those at the table with the Master — humble benches, with the world’s driest broad beans, but a lot of laughter and a lot of kindness.

‘Which is the best seat?’ The answer that evening is like the answer of Jesus’s parable — the best seat is not so much determined by how high up it is as by who’s sitting nearby. So, where would Jesus be sitting? “*The greater you are, the more you should behave humbly,*” says the first reading; and since Jesus is the greatest, He has behaved the most humbly. He gave up His seat at the right hand of God the Father Almighty to sit around in the dust of Galilee’s streets, teaching; and at awkward meals with

the leading Pharisees, eating, and treating all as equals, so as to get across the message: ‘the best seat is not the one you might imagine.’ No, the best seat is the one next to Jesus, because that’s where they’re talking about things that matter; that’s where regardless of social class we’re all ordinary people together, learning from our extraordinary Lord; it’s where you are honoured by the living presence of God Himself.

So, which is the best seat this Sunday morning? It is, of course, right here in the Church at Mass, sitting close to Jesus. Where else might we be sitting? We could be sitting snacking in front of the internet; or sitting on the Tube on the way to the pub lunch; or even sitting by the River Thames at an exclusive champagne picnic — all these things are fine, but not at half past 10 this Sunday morning. We are called — privileged! — to be sitting here with Jesus. Because *here* is the best conversation, the best food, the best company: our readings and our prayers are our conversation with Jesus; His body and Blood is our food of divine life; our companions here, whoever they

may be, are our brothers and sisters in Christ. Mass is the great leveller — you can be a President or a pauper, but in the pews everyone is in the same seats, everyone is equal.

To choose to sit here at this banquet with Jesus, yes, requires humility, because on earth seats with Jesus are not very exalted. (Not even the *sedia* of the Pope himself!) Sitting with Jesus doesn’t often win you friends in high places, or win you seats in a company boardroom. No — but it’s still the best seat in the house. To choose to sit with Jesus especially requires intellectual humility, to accept that we are creatures and that God is our Creator, so that it’s completely OK that we can’t always fathom out His ways. But we trust faithfully that what He speaks is loving and true, so that to sit here, humbly, as He asks, in seats close to Jesus, is the best preparation for the heavenly banquet. There, Jesus has returned to His throne of glory, and one day will say to you, “*My friend, move up higher,*” and you will be able to say, ‘Yes, Lord, I recognize Your voice, I recognize Your food, I recognize Your company ... and humbly, Lord, I take my seat close to You for ever.’

A brief glance at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading gives us an even more beautiful insight into the glory of the heavenly banquet, and of the foretaste of that banquet spread before us here at Mass. I always love to read this passage in the interpretative key of its referring to the Mass. “*What you have come to is nothing known to the senses: not a blazing fire, or a gloom turning to total darkness, or a storm, or trumpeting thunder, or the great voice speaking ...*” — I guess that these rather sum up the awesomeness of some of the epiphanies of God in the Old Testament — “... *But what you have come to is Mt Zion, and the City of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem where the millions of angels have gathered for the festival, with the whole Church, in which everyone is a ‘first-born son’ and a citizen of heaven.*” Imagine that that passage speaks not just of a vision of heaven, where we are called to be seated one day with Jesus the bridegroom, but also speaks of the here and now at Mass. *What you have come to is Mt Zion and the City of the living God ... with angels ... and the whole Church ...* Seen in this light, this simple chapel

becomes ablaze with glory, doesn’t it, and we see that our being here, our being called to sit here, is the very heart of our being human. Let’s never forget, whatever life throws at us, that the fixed point of our life is to take our place regularly, faithfully, humbly and devotedly, here at Mass. It is a simple joy beyond all other, and yet is the greatest thing we can ever do. Seated here with Jesus, sitting close to Jesus, means that we are beginning to do now the very thing that we are called to do in eternity. If we wish to be happy at the heavenly banquet, then we need to be ‘at home’ with Jesus here on earth, which means most intimately at the banquet of Mass. It matters not which seat we have — bishop’s throne, simple stool, or the floor itself — what matters is that we are here, “*with the whole Church, in which everyone is a ‘first-born son’ and a citizen of heaven.*”