

OUTSIDE THE COMFORT ZONE

Ecclesiasticus 10. 12-18

Hebrews 13. 1-8

Luke 14. 1, 7-14

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

One often hears a popular term that I would like us to consider this morning. That term is ‘comfort zone.’ As I understand it, a person’s ‘comfort zone’ refers to those situations in which the person feels comfortable, safe, free from threat and even challenge. For the person involved, the comfort zone is a thoroughly comfortable place. Life there is marked by ease and familiarity.

It’s natural to like one’s comfort zone, but most of us would admit that we should not remain there indefinitely. People do not become better, or more mature, or holier by lingering in their comfort zone. That just doesn’t happen. I’m reminded of a poster that I saw in shop recently. It showed a man who was still lying in bed, with a big smile on his face; and the caption read, ‘Life begins at the end of your comfort zone’.

I bring up the matter of the comfort zone because it is something that concerns our Lord in today’s Gospel. The passage divides easily into two parts. In the first part, Jesus cautions us against sitting in the place of honour at a wedding banquet and advises taking the lowest place instead. In the second part, he urges us to invite the crippled, lame, and blind when we give a luncheon or dinner, rather than friends, relatives, and rich people.

So there is advice here for us when we’re the guest, as well as when we host an event.

But Christ is not simply offering suggestions about etiquette in this passage. Something more is going on. What our Lord advocates is not for social occasions only; it is also meant to shape the entirety of our lives.

Choosing the seat of honour for ourselves sounds very much to me like craving our comfort zone. The best seat is where we want to be, because we think it will be comfortable, safe, free from threat or even challenge. It will no doubt make us feel rather good about ourselves, as well. Jesus cautions us against moving into a comfort zone all on our own; when we do so, we think that we know what we're doing, and that this is something that we need to do.

He also advises us not to stay in that comfort zone once we find ourselves there. Rather than limiting our guest lists to people who are clones of ourselves, people with whom we're comfortable, people who don't threaten or even challenge us, Christ instructs us to invite to lunch or dinner those who are different; people who make us uncomfortable, but whose difference from us may bring with it a blessing.

In other words, we shouldn't make it your business to move into a comfort zone, or if we find yourselves in one, to stay there. Life is bigger than that.

Our Lord not only tells us this, he demonstrates it. His life, his public ministry, his passion and resurrection all provide abundant examples of not remaining in a comfort zone, and not trying to enter one. Repeatedly, over and over again, Jesus takes the low seat and invites unlikely people to be his guests. And finally, Christ takes the worst seat of all – on the cross – so that those who come to his heavenly banquet afterwards are allowed through the door, precisely because they claim no merit of their own.

You see, there are two kinds of religion. The first kind encourages us to stay inside our comfort zone, a well-defined, nice, safe place, where everything is predictable, nothing threatens, and no-one thinks. This comfort zone is not a passionate place. It draws people in, satisfies them on some level, but never leads them to change and never sends them forth.

Religion of this sort resembles taking the seat of honour at a feast. At last we are where we 'deserve' to be; we are in with the 'in' crowd. But religion of this sort pulls up the drawbridge; it excludes and does not consider those who are different or out of the 'in' crowd.

The second kind of religion may find itself in the comfort zone, but always decides, like Christ does, to step outside of it. The safe place, the preferred seating, the predictable crowd is not enough. The reason it is not enough is a theological one: the Son of God, the true God, the God who is alive and who intervenes in our lives never lingers long in the comfort zone. This God keeps appearing in the low places, among the unlikely people, and what's more, enjoys himself thoroughly as he does it. We are then faced with a question: Will we faithful people go where our Lord has gone?

The ways we can move out of our comfort zone are varied. We can decide, for example, to pursue a deeper spirituality, by resolving to spend more time with God in prayer, using a new booklet that we are making available this morning; or we can decide to serve God in a new way, by volunteering to help out with a new ministry at St Stephen's. Or we can think in new and fresh ways about our faith, and join a Bible study group that will begin in October; or we can simply come alongside someone we know, and try to help them on their spiritual journey. In all of these cases, stepping out of our comfort zones will mean that we decide somehow to say 'yes' to God.

In today's Gospel and in a hundred other ways, Jesus asks us that we do him the honour of keeping ourselves, our Christianity and our image of him from becoming domesticated and trapped in some comfort zone or other. His enemies were never finally able to trap him in that way; and certainly we, who are his friends should not do so either.

As we refuse to linger long in any comfort zone, no matter how well appointed it is, and as we look for the low seat and make room for the unseemly guest, we allow ourselves to move past things that are safe and encounter unexpected challenge. *This* is what it means to follow the crucified and risen One. *This* is what it means to live the life of faith.

Amen.