

## SETTING AN EXAMPLE

Ecclesiasticus 10. 12-18

Hebrews 13. 1-8, 15-16

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.

Scripture, starting with the eating of a piece of fruit in the Garden of Eden and ending with Revelation's image of a heavenly banquet in the new Jerusalem, is full of meals and dinner parties. One notable dinner party, recorded in the book of Daniel, contains elements that are instructive to today's gospel passage.

The story recounted in Daniel begins with Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, conquering Jerusalem, looting the Temple of its sacred vessels and having them placed in his own treasury. Many years later, Nebuchadnezzar's grandson, king Belshazzar, during a great dinner party, commanded that the vessels that had been taken out of the house of God in Jerusalem be brought to the banquet so that the king, his lords, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. So the golden vessels were brought in, and while Belshazzar and his dinner guests drank, they praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, wood, and stone.

In the midst of their revelry, idolatry, sacrilege and self-exaltation, a finger appeared and wrote four words on the wall: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN. The king blanched at the sight, and called for his magicians to tell him what this meant, but they could not read the writing on the wall. Someone remembered an Israelite who had gifts of interpretation, and so they brought in Daniel.

Daniel told Belshazzar that he should have remembered the story of his grandfather, Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel said, 'O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar kingship, greatness, glory and majesty...But when his heart was lifted up and his

spirit was hardened so that he acted proudly, he was deposed from his kingly throne, ...until he learned that the Most High God has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals...And you, Belshazzar...have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this! You have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven. You have praised the gods of silver and gold,...but the God in whose power is your very breath, you have not honoured' (5. 18-23).

'And this is the writing that was inscribed:...MENE, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; TEKEL, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting; PARSIN,<sup>1</sup> your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and the Persians' (5. 24-28). That very night Belshazzar was killed, and his kingdom was divided and fell into the hands of his enemies.

Now, with similar themes of self-promotion and downfall, today's gospel reading is another account of a dinner party, one of as many as ten meals that are recorded in the gospel of Luke. Our text is taken from Luke 14, and this is the third account of our Lord eating with the Pharisees on the Sabbath. None of these dinners has gone well, so by now Luke is setting a scene that is almost mathematic in its predictability. Dinner + Jesus + Pharisees + Sabbath = (equals) Conflict.

Christ is not at table with drunken and preening royalty; he is with some of the most sober and religious people of his day. The Pharisees, to all outward appearances, were the most pious, observant, zealous, and faithful adherents to Judaism. If you wanted to know what righteous living in the face of God and man looked like, you looked to the Pharisees to find trustworthy examples.

But our Lord, who notices that the Pharisees at this dinner party were scuffling with one another to get the best seats at the table, isn't so sure about the example they are

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<sup>1</sup> PERES, which appears in the text, is the singular form of PARSIN.

setting. Where the Pharisees sit is an indicator of how humble or self-exalted they are. It seems that anyone so willing to exalt themselves *outwardly* has already magnified themselves *inwardly* in their own heart. Jesus says that such self-exaltation is fraught with danger. What if the Pharisees have misjudged themselves?

Christ's real concern is with God's final judgement of the Pharisees (and indeed, of humanity in general). Those who are unjust will suffer a downfall from which they cannot recover; and those who are just will receive an exaltation from God that is beyond human imagining. Our Lord is not passing final judgement on the Pharisees at this dinner; rather, he wants to encourage them to repent, to do good and to rise to the eternal life God desires for them. To be sure, there is danger in this gospel reading; but there is so much hope there too.

And here is the most important point in this reading for you and me. Jesus's concern about the Pharisees' behaviour at dinner is not so much about their etiquette or manners, but rather about their example of living. They were not living the kind of lives or setting the kind of examples that attract people to God.<sup>2</sup> Several chapters earlier in the gospel of Luke, Christ likens the Pharisees to unmarked graves that people walk over and do not notice (11. 44). In other words, a bad example makes the Pharisees (and us) *irrelevant* to the world around us.

Now that may seem like a hard word, but our Lord continues: 'For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted'. When we humble ourselves, we become more than relevant; we become transformative. When we strive for godly living, the people whom we live amongst

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<sup>2</sup> God intended Israel to set a good example of living for the world (cf Is 42. 6). Other nations would be enlightened and attracted to God through Israel's good example of how to live in relationship with one another and God. Other nations would see the blessing that came from such a life, and they would stream in and be saved. This was Israel's vocation. The Christian Church inherits a vocation from its older brother in the faith, Judaism; yet ours is not a vocation under the law, but in the person of Jesus Christ.

are attracted, enlightened, and enlivened by our examples. They are attracted and drawn into a relationship with God, who can and wills to save them.

We who are members of St Stephen's may not realise it, but we are very fortunate. We are fortunate because we have the potential to reach so many people; not only here in Guernsey, but on the mainland and elsewhere. Each one of us has been called by God to be a bit of leaven, a pinch of salt, or a light in the places where we live and spend our time. Think, for a moment, of those 166 hours a week that we are not in church together. What happens then? What examples are we setting?

If we can make a start at humbling ourselves, or persevere if we have already begun the process; if we can strive for godly living; if we can seek to live our lives as a worthy profession of the Christian faith; we will have numerous and unexpected opportunities to draw people close to Christ. They will discover what we know as a living, breathing, daily reality: the presence of Jesus in our lives, which makes all the difference. Today, as we are given this challenge, may we think honestly about our lives, our examples, the way we treat one another here, and the way we treat others elsewhere.

Let us rise to the life that God desires for us. That kind of humility, repentance and change is absolutely essential to the Christian life and witness. That kind of repentance and change is personally necessary for me; I know that. When my days are counted, I do not want to be weighed on the scales and found wanting. But the recompense for any one of us who decides to humble ourselves before God and to strive for godly living is beyond imagining.

Imagine what it would be like if, when we see God face to face, he calls out to us and says, 'Friend, move up...higher?' Amen.