

Jesus at a Pharisee's House

The Gospel Reading from last Sunday (Luke 13:22-30), showed Jesus comparing salvation to eating a feast in a banquet hall that one enters through a narrow door. After the door was locked by the owner, some came knocking, seeking to gain entrance. They said, "*We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets.*" Today's Gospel Reading (Luke 14:1-14), is an example of people who might talk like that. Jesus is again invited to the home of a Pharisee for a festive Sabbath meal (see 7:36-50 and 11:37-54 for previous meals with Pharisees).

As Jesus is reclining at the table, He finds Himself face-to-face with a man suffering from dropsy. This is an affliction that causes an abnormal accumulation of fluids in connective tissues and cavities of the body, with symptoms of swelling and defective circulation. It is usually a sign of more serious medical problems.

Before helping this diseased man, Jesus asks a question of the Pharisees and experts in the law who were present at the meal: "*Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?*" (Lk. 14:3). In the case of the crippled woman healed in the synagogue on the Sabbath, Jesus did not ask before He acted (13:10-17). But in 6:6-11 we have a story in which Jesus asks a similar question about what is lawful on the Sabbath.

The query of Jesus elicits an uneasy silence. A study of Jewish religious teaching reveals that there was disagreement as to the proper answer. In one law book it is written, "Let no one assist a beast in giving birth on the Sabbath day."

Even if it drops [its newborn] into a cistern or into a pit, one is not to raise it up on the Sabbath. But other teachers said that needed assistance should be given even on the Sabbath to animals who required it.

When the religious authorities present at the meal refused to answer Jesus' question, He went ahead and healed the man with dropsy. The follow-up question

asked by Jesus implies that actions speak louder than words. No matter what the law experts might teach in theory, in actual practice they would help a child or an animal that falls into a well on the Sabbath Day. This proves that healing on the Sabbath is lawful even if that healing could have been put off to another day. Again, there is only silence from Jesus' critics. Their very silence speaks volumes.

While sitting at the meal, Jesus tells three parables. The first is prompted by the practice of the invited guests to pick the places of honour at the table. Jesus tells a story about a person invited to a wedding banquet who chooses a place of honour. The host is forced to ask this person to move to a place away from the head table to make room for a more distinguished guest. Just as some of Jesus' contemporaries are replaced at the feast of salvation by people from faraway lands (13:28-30), so here humiliation comes to a proud person who is demoted. Jesus suggests the proper course of action: start out sitting in the lowest place. All the guests will take note when the host asks such a person to take a better place. The general rule stated by Jesus in verse 11 will be repeated at the conclusion of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (18:14). Jesus is hoping that even if the Pharisees won't heed his admonition, at least His disciples will learn to practice humility.

The second parable is directed to Jesus' host. It concerns the guest list for such festive banquets as the one to which Jesus had been invited. Four categories of people who should not be included on the guest list are balanced by four categories of guests who should be invited. What Jesus suggests is the very opposite of common practice. The people in the first four categories are likely to return the favour to the host; those in the second category could not. But what a host does not enjoy on earth as repayment for generosity will be enjoyed at the banquet of salvation. God Himself is the model of one who invites all classes of people to His great supper of salvation (14:21).