

***May I speak in the name of the living God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen***

As we heard in our Gospel reading today, Jesus was invited to the house of a leading Pharisee for a meal. When he arrived, he felt that he was being watched with hostile eyes – and so he reflected on what he saw by telling the parable of the banquet.

The Pharisees were very religious people, and set themselves up as models. Yet, here in the scene described for us, we see them scrambling for places of honour, giving us an insight into how proud, and vain and selfish they were underneath the respectable exterior. There is a real sense in which they were at the banquet – not so much to honour their host, but to seek honour for themselves.

Jesus says to them, those who humble themselves will be exalted.

One of the key messages of our Gospel reading today is the need for humility in our spiritual lives.

During one summer holiday a few years ago, I had the opportunity to visit a number of different places, including Chichester Cathedral, the Royal Pavilion at Brighton, and the Great Hall in Winchester with the legendary Round Table of King Arthur. Each of which have something to offer as we reflect on our Gospel today.

Chichester Cathedral looks a little like Salisbury Cathedral from the outside, with a traditional pointed spire reaching to the sky.

As you enter the building, you cannot help being struck by the size and majesty of the place, the ceiling soaring high above, supported on massive pillars; The wonderful sense of a special place that has been set aside as holy and used for prayer and worship throughout the centuries; Along the walls and in the aisles, tombs, statues and memorials to saints and martyrs who had an association with the cathedral at various times in its history. Amongst, them, of course – St Richard of Chirchester.

When we enter a great cathedral, we are immediately humbled. We feel small and insignificant. But in a strange way we are exalted too.

When we humble ourselves and let go of the things that give us a false sense of importance and superiority, and which separate us from others, we find that we are exalted.

We begin to realise that our true worth, comes not from within ourselves, but comes from the fact that we are children of God.

Each Sunday, we are invited to a banquet – the banquet of the Eucharist.

Here, Jesus is the host, we are all his guests. Here, there are no special places – you can sit where you wish. Here, privilege, status and rank have no meaning. Although we might have different roles, different gifts to offer within our worship - Differences don't count.

Before God we are all equal.

It is not that we are reduced to the same common denominator. It is that we are all raised up. In the house of God, every place is a place of honour. Entering here, makes everyone equal. It is in being humbled, that we find we are exalted.

It is this spirit of humility, that Christ calls us to take with us into our daily lives, each week, when we leave this place.

There is a story about a mayor of a town, who invited all the people of the town to a banquet.

Amongst those who arrived for the feast, was a man of great distinction called Daniel. Daniel was a great scholar and a wise man. However, he was also a very humble man, and didn't like being honoured. When he arrived, that Mayor naturally invited him to sit at the top table.

Daniel thanked him, but said that he would prefer to sit amongst the poor at the table near the door. And that is where he sat.

When other distinguished guests arrived the mayor invited them to sit wherever they liked.

Understandably, they chose to sit at the top table.

The banquet hall filled up and eventually the only place left was one at the bottom table. At the last minute another distinguished man arrived. The mayor had no option but to take him to the vacant seat.

“But this is the bottom table” complained the man.

“No” replied the mayor. “This is the top table.”

“I don’t understand.” Said the man.

The mayor answered –“wherever Daniel sits is the top table.”

The moral of this story is that it is not the place that honours the guest, but the guest who honours the place.

We don’t know in what place Jesus sat during the meal in the Pharisees house. But we do know that wherever it was, that was the place of honour.

The banquet in our Gospel reading is a symbol of the Kingdom. We should never be concerned about seeking a place of honour – for it is a privilege to be invited at all. And in any case, every place, is a place of honour.

As mentioned, earlier, a second place I visited was the Royal Pavilion in Brighton. It is an entirely unique building – on the outside modelled on an Indian style of architecture, while inside decorated in lavish Chinese themes. Interestingly, the building was designed for George the Prince Regent, by John Nash, the architect of this and many other Churches. Interestingly, his tomb lies outside St James' Church in East Cowes on the Isle of Wight, where I was Vicar for 7 and a half years between 2003 to 2010.

Although the Banqueting Hall is vast, and lavish, and some of the meals served there had as many as 100 courses – it is noticeable that there was no traditional head to the table.

The Prince Regent, who later became King George IV, preferred to sit in amongst his guests – doing away with the social etiquettes of rank and position that would have kept him sitting next to only the most distinguished.

Finally, let us take a trip to Winchester and the Great Hall - the only part of Winchester Castle still standing.

Many places in England, particularly in the south and west, **claim** connections with King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. Yet even today, with all the tools of modern **archaeology**, it's still impossible to know whether such a king existed, or whether his story is simply a **legend**.

Certainly there are historical references to a leader called Arthur, who lived around the end of the fifth century. He had already become something of a **folk** hero by the ninth century as a **warrior** king. But none of the information that has come down to us is very **reliable**.

What is certain however, is that the ideas of honour and chivalry that we associate with King Arthur have been an inspiration for many.

Arthur's Round Table exists - in Winchester. It is inside the magnificent Great Hall.

Although the table once had twelve legs, has a diameter of 18 feet (5.4 metres) and weighs nearly one and a half tons, it has hung on the wall for centuries. It has this inscription:

"This is the round table of Arthur with 24 of his named knights."

Unfortunately scientific tests have shown that is **unlikely**. The table was almost certainly made at some time between 1250 and 1280 - about thirty years after the Hall itself was built. The table was painted (or, just possibly, re-painted) in 1520, on the instructions of King Henry VIII.



Of course the significant and important fact is that there is no "head of the table" at a round table and so no one person is at a privileged position.

In this way the knights were all peers and there was no "leader" as there were at so many other medieval tables.

Today as we reflect on our Gospel reading, let us rejoice that Christ invites us to gather around his table with him in this Eucharistic banquet.

Fed and nourished by his word and sacrament, may we apply the same principles of humility in all that we do – so that all may know that they have a place of honour through God's love.

Amen.