
HEAR AND ATTEND AND LISTEN - AND OBEY

“Hear and attend and listen; for this befell and be-happened and became and was, O my Best Beloved” – the opening of *The Cat that Walked by Himself* from Kipling’s *Just So Stories*. The Cat, you will remember, is the one animal that does not conform to the rules of the cave, which have bound all the other animals into servitude. Jesus, like the Cat, refuses to be bound by the strict social rules governing who could eat with whom. He reminds the Pharisees that there is a whole world outside the comfort zone of their cosy dining rooms – a world that looks dangerous, just like the wild, wet woods of Kipling’s story – a world with which, dangerous, uncomfortable, challenging as it is, God calls his guests to be engaged. The Greek word which is translated “guests” has the sense of being called or specially chosen – and one commentary suggests that it is not just the host who has chosen these people, but that they consider themselves to be worth inviting. Certainly their manoeuvring for the best seats suggests that they had a consciousness of their own worth and its entitlement. How often do we see this happening in everyday life? Just turn on the TV, open a newspaper or log on to the Internet and you will see those who consider themselves “chosen” - marked out by some talent, fame, fortune or connections - busy manoeuvring for the top spot! It is interesting that when David Cameron visited India recently people were struck by his modesty and lack of pretension. Sometimes I think there is hope for the world after all! But genuine humility is a scarce and scarcely valued quality in the world we live in. Dickens has a lot to answer for in the damage he had done to this most important aspect of Christianity and today’s gospel itself has given rise to a kind of inverse pride in sitting as near the back as you can. Be that as it may, the word “humility” comes from the Latin root “humus” – the earth, the soil from which, you will also recall, we are all made by God in his image. “Humility” therefore, recognises that there are no greater or lesser places at the table or anywhere else. All are chosen by God because he created them all equal.

All this and more is contained in the story that Jesus tells his host and fellow diners. He begins with an ostensibly common-sense version of a proverb and just when everyone is nodding sagely and going “Yes, well, that’s pretty obvious ...” he springs the sting-in-the-tail on them and turns upside down all the rules and conventions which bind people into servitude. Hospitality is not about social relationships or obligations or influence or even family love – it is about giving with the same free and abundant generosity with which God chooses us to be part of his banquet. I wonder how much of it went in? How many of the guests were quite sure that they really did deserve the top place? How many of them were simply scandalised at the mere idea of eating with their inferiors? How many of them reassured themselves that they were making all the correct contributions to the support of the poor, without having to rub shoulders with them as well? How many of them were convinced that their own prosperity meant that God approved of them?

Like all parables, this one had to be listened to – not just in the moment of telling, but for long afterwards, listening with the deep attention of the soul. Thinking about today’s readings I was struck by how important listening is in the Bible. How many passages begin “Hear, O Israel”? How often does Jesus say “if you have ears to hear, listen...” (5 times! And “hear” appears 2184 times and “listen” 420). When God has something important to say, we are expected to listen – to listen with the deep attention of the soul. I’ve just spent 5 weeks listening, but not being able to understand very much of what I heard, because I was in Spain, and although I can read Spanish a bit, the spoken language is much too quick for me to catch more than the most common words. Not having to listen was, in some ways, very peaceful. You can’t answer the phone or be depressed by the news or worry about what people are talking about on the train. Consequently it is very easy to become detached from the stresses of modern life and just let it all wash over you! The world seems to have got on perfectly well without my worrying about it for 5 weeks. Does it matter that I didn’t know what

was going on? It is a story that can raise some deep underlying thoughts and some interesting parallels (or are they parables?) for the church. I offer 3 thoughts.

A good many people in the world today find it quite convenient not to be able to hear or understand the language of the spirit. Switching off the vocabulary enables you to ignore the issues and challenges. You can get by without it. Life is less stressful. It's comfortable. Others have never learnt the language or heard people talking clearly and simply in it. They struggle with the incomprehensible fluency of those who can talk about spiritual matters. They are baffled, frustrated perhaps, and certainly doomed to only flashes of meaning in a sea of obscurity. What is all this supposed to mean? They don't know. They have little chance of learning. They may give up.

But it works the other way too. How well to those who have a faith, a spiritual life or who are members of a religion actually hear what is going on around them in the world? Is the language of the secular world something that is perhaps dangerous, even hostile? Or is it just a language that we prefer not to speak? A dialogue that we cannot enter into fluently? Or do we think we understand it and engage with it, when in fact we are handicapped by our own preoccupations and interpretations of that world around us?

Finally, how well to we understand what God is saying in all this? When I was fortunate enough to be in the great silence of the Sinai desert, I found how little we need to talk and how much we need to listen. My recent experience in Spain had a similar effect, reinforcing the fact that I didn't have to keep talking or reading or doing in order to be close to God – being is the beginning of everything else. A favourite story: -

An old man would sit motionless for hours on end in the church. Finally the priest asked him what God talked to him about. "God doesn't talk, he just listens" was the reply. "Well, then, what do you talk to God about?" said the priest, "I don't talk either. I just listen."

Like the Pharisees, we need to listen, to listen with the deep attention of the soul. So what might God be saying in this gospel reading that we need to hear? I can't tell you what you need to hear, although I am certain that you will hear it. I can only tell you what it said to me. This parable seems to me to be asking how we make our choices – who we chose to associate with. We all make choices all the time and very often, like the Pharisees, we automatically choose the things and people and places that are like us, in what is often called our comfort zone. Though we are all capable of self-sacrifice, charity and compassion, and though we may strive to understand and follow Jesus' teaching in the big decisions and events of life, I found myself asking "what about the little day-to-day things?" To take a simple example: where do I choose to shop? Which shops do I go into and which do I avoid? It's just one aspect of life, but am I governed in this by the needs of the poor or am I just choosing lunch or dinner with the kind of people I feel comfortable with? I feel challenged to think about it, especially in view of the hard economic times ahead of us all.

So, best beloved people – beloved of God, who has created you in his image – let each of us hear and listen and attend with the deep attention of the soul to what God wishes us to understand.

NOTES:

Speaking and listening

Whingers are wrecking chance of economic recovery.

Not easy to know who is saying what, let alone who is right!

You are who you eat with or which businesses you patronise

Automatic assumption of precedence/power. God's banquet is not about power or importance.

Luke 14:

The Greek word rendered as "guests" means *apparently chosen* or *see themselves as chosen*. The gathering of God's elect at the end of time was commonly depicted as a "wedding banquet" (v. 8). There the host is God. The *punch line* (v. 11) is good manners, but Jesus is drawing a conclusion about the kingdom: attendance depends on God's invitation. God will not be fooled by self-promotion! Jewish and Greco-Roman societies both spurned the "poor" (v. 13) and the disabled. A Qumran document says that these people will be excluded from the banquet, but Jesus says: *share with them!* (v. 13) Giving to those unable to "repay" (v. 14) will admit one to the kingdom. For the Pharisee, this is a real surprise. He should have invited the man with dropsy.

Verse 8: Proverbs [25:6-7](#) advises: "Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, 'Come up here,' than to be put lower in the presence of a noble". In Luke, the same idea is found in [11:43](#) and [20:46](#)

Verse 14: Jesus appeals not to a spirit of material gain, i.e. the hope of reward in the judgement, but rather to the faith that the principle of love will be vindicated. See Colossians [3:23-24](#). [[NOAB](#)]

Roberta Bondi points out in her book **To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church** that "humility did not mean for them [the ammas and abbas] a continuous cringing, cultivating a low self-image, and taking a perverse pleasure in being always forgotten, unnoticed, or taken for granted. Instead, humility meant to them a way of seeing other people as being as valuable in God's eyes as ourselves. It was for them a relational term having to do precisely with learning to value others, whoever they were. It had to do with developing the kind of empathy with the weaknesses of others that made it impossible to judge others out of our own self-righteousness."

At the root of **humility** is the Greek word **humus**. Earth. The earth that God made and called good, the earth from which, as one of the creation stories goes, God fashioned us. Humility is our fundamental recognition that we each draw our life and breath from the same source, the God who made us and calls us beloved.

humility helps us remain grounded in the best sense of the word: centered in the **humus** from which we have been created, the gloriously ordinary earth from which God made each one of

us. Humility enables us to recognize our dependence on the One who fashioned us as well as our kinship with those who share this earth, this humus.

Textual notes are taken from the website: Textweek