

TWELFTH SUNDAY after PENTECOST Luke 14.1, 7-14 Ascension 1.9.19

Two years ago, you kind folk cut me loose to travel to London. On a Sunday, Mrs McEntee and I chanced along New Bond Street in search of St James' Piccadilly. New Bond was a strip of the most disgustingly opulent boutiques with sinfully extravagant prices that only a big-noting nobody or a touring Australian cricketer may afford. In each of the Louis Vuitton windows stood an almost life-sized prehistoric animal gleaming in gold. All that was missing to complete the tableau was the Biblical Golden calf. From each beast hung just one item: a piece of diamond jewellery from a snout of a brontosaurus, a Rolex watch from a triceratops' horn, a single handbag hanging from a stegosaurus' bony back-plate.

But, had the window dresser got the image wrong? All of these creatures had evolved such an enormous weight of defensive carapace that, in seeking to plod across primeval swamps, their weight caused them to sink into the ooze and drown and to become extinct. Here was Louis Vuitton seeking to weigh down this generation wallowing in wealth, with his designer accessories. Was this generation of the poised and precious ones also in danger of drowning under disgusting luxury?

Across the street was St. James, a church with Australian connections, viz., Joseph Banks baptized there in 1743, George Bass married in 1800, and Matthew Flinders buried in 1814. The church logo is "Inclusive, Welcoming, Adventurous," a little colony of heaven in the Sodom of sybaritic London extravagance.

As soon as Eucharist was over, a fraternity of the London friendless entered. At a cost of \$1500 a day, to keep outreach and salaries going, which would buy a pair of Imelda Marcos' shoes or a Beyonce scarf across the road, the church is the day shelter, a warm place for the penniless street-dwellers, where they are fed, showered and wee-wee'd.

By invitation, Jesus had ventured into a staged set-up, a trap of the Jerusalem New Bond Street upper crust. The Upper Crust? Crumbs held together by a lot of dough. With eyes narrowed by the cataracts of critical prejudice, the divan diners had set this snare for Jesus. They felt that this trouble-making charlatan had truly come from the dark side, come to seduce the easily led sheep to follow him.

In truth, he, the Son of God, had come to cast the bright, healing sunshine of God's love on these cockroaches, who preferred to scuttle in the comfy shadows. But, their intense pride in changeless Judaism screened the sun from the Son of God's generosity.

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained," thought Jesus. He ached to break through their hard-headedness and their hard-heartedness. So, he went straight on the offensive, turning the spot-light on his watchers. With draw-dropping verve, he drew attention to how the cavalcade of big-noting nobodies, parading themselves as special somebodies, had shabbily scrambled for prestigious places nearest to the host. Clambering for the top spots ran the awful hazard of being embarrassed by the advent of a more deserving latecomer with a claim to that prime place, and thus, being bumped down, they would be sheepishly humiliated.

Jesus had come to arouse a revolution in table manners by bringing to bear the fresh, healing sunshine of God's love for all. He had come as the great reverser of our priorities, our hierarchies and our values, where they were wrong. He taught "Don't exalt yourself. Don't

insist on a recognition you believe you deserve. Ignore, even upend the pecking order.” The kingdom that he had come to inaugurate was one of abundance for everyone, where everyone, as at St. James’ was welcomed and included in God’s great adventure. And the currency of God’s kingdom was humility not arrogance.

Humility is a tricky thing. The very moment that you claim to have achieved it, it eludes us. Very little in our culture rewards humility. In entertainment, sports, politics, we have an unhealthy admiration for the loudest, the biggest, the greatest.

True humility should not prevent us taking legitimate pride in our achievements. Even a former archbishop wrote a book on humility, of which he was very proud. True humility allows the human buzz we may feel when our child or a Margaret Fulton sponge turns out well. If we use our God-given talents for the benefit of others, we are entitled to be pleased. When we gather here around Jesus’ table, where all must be equal, we are actively protesting the accepted culture of competitiveness that surrounds us. To eat and drink together as one, means that we choose to contend with the pecking order that defines board-rooms and elections. We are called to humble ourselves and to place our allegiance in a radically different kingdom.

True humility is a recognition of the limits and dangers of our human powers, unaided by God’s grace, a recognition that we are not quite so clever as we would like to think we are. True humility reminds us just how close we came to atomic oblivion in the Cold war period, the disasters of Chernobyl and Tushima, and how insanely did the world respond to 9.11, that, that was yet another close-run thing.

True humility is realizing just how very small we are before the great mysteries of life, and how utterly dependent we are on God’s unfailing providential care and protection. Like the St James’ clientele, we are all beggars in God’s bread-line, hopefully sharing what we receive.

True humility is standing outside on a starry night to look up at the wondrous glory of the myriad, marcasite grandeur of the everlasting stars and to realize just how small we truly are. True humility is falling to our knees because there is nowhere else to go, to cry “O God, help me to live, for apart from you, I may as well be dead, Breathe on me, breath of life, fill me with life anew. Unless the Lord builds the house, we labour in vain who build it. All we do is of little worth unless God blesses the deed.” May God bless your work in the coming week.