

**Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C
(Aug. 29, 2004)**

Seating Arrangements?

Someone once asked Father Pedro Arrupe, our former Father General, why it was that suddenly the Church was putting such an emphasis on social justice. In the past, this person said, there were many holy people and important spiritual writers who never even mentioned it. Father Arrupe answered quite simply, “Because today we know more.” (Ronald Rolheiser, *Against an Infinite Horizon*, p. 124.)

And that’s true. Today we know more about social issues and the social causes of poverty and injustice in our world. Now you may say, but the Church has always preached charity and helping the poor. Indeed some people feel they hear about it too much in their churches. But social justice is not the same as charity. It’s not about what I or any individual might do to help the poor. Social justice has to do, as its name implies, with society. It’s about groups and institutions and even whole nations. It’s about what we do, not as individuals, but as a people. And as a people we are part of institutions or systems that sometimes, perhaps frequently, do things that are unjust or unfair without our even realizing it.

An author I read recently said this:

“When Pedro Arrupe said, ‘Today we know more!’ he was referring precisely to the fact that current sociological and economic analysis has shown us, with clarity, how our political, economic, social, and ecclesial systems, irrespective of how individually sincere we might be in our support of them, are unfair and wounding to so many others. Given this, our ignorance could be more culpable and the imperative to ‘walk justly’ becomes less escapable.” (Rolheiser, *op. cit.*, p. 126.)

Well now, you might be thinking, just what does all this have to do with our scripture readings today? A good deal, I think. Let’s reflect a bit on the Gospel passage.

Jesus says, “If you want to be honored, don’t take too high a place at the table, because you might be humiliated when the host comes in. Don’t even take the place that’s yours because then you will not be honored

either. Rather take the lowest place. Then when the host comes in, he will walk up to you in front of them all and he will say to you, 'Don't sit there, come higher up,' and then you will be honored."

In reading that passage we have to be aware that Jesus is at a dinner party where he observes the guests choosing the places of honor, and we have to understand that there was a strict protocol about where people sat at a banquet. Even today we place honored guests at the head table, and the more honored they are the closer they sit to the host and hostess. What Jesus is advocating is something revolutionary, something that would totally disrupt, if not even overturn the social customs of his culture.

The same thing is true in the second part of the parable where he says when you give a party don't invite those who will invite you in return. Rather invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, people who will not be able to repay you or invite you in return. Then he says, you will be blessed. Again, what he says is revolutionary, deliberately calculated to overturn the social systems of his time. Why? Because he knew that those systems, those institutions, were hurting people, and he wanted to change them. Indeed much of his teaching says the same thing, and even though he would not use the words, what he was preaching was social justice. But, as we know, that got him into trouble, much as the same sort of advice gets people into trouble today.

As I read the passage I could not help but think of a situation that is all too familiar to us today. People contribute large amounts of money to political candidates because they expect something in return. Or people are appointed to important positions in government or in the diplomatic world because they have supported a particular candidate.

When we invite those who cannot repay us we are inviting the way that God invites to the heavenly banquet. After all, who can repay God? We are inviting the way Jesus does to the Kingdom. Isn't that true when we sit down with the poor and the smallest, with the miserable and the wretched, when we take their place, their stand, their position? Isn't that what Jesus did?

To that advice Ben Sirach in the first reading tells us this: "My son, my daughter, be gentle in carrying out your business and you will be better loved than a lavish giver."

Ben Sirach advises us to carry out our business in the office, in the family, at school, in traffic, in everything, gently. (I am reminded of those signs you used to see going into Maryland: You are now entering Maryland. Please drive gently.) We will follow Ben Sirach's advice if we take into account the weak, the broken, the poor, the small. And we will be loved the better for it. If enough people did it, then the whole world would change – which is exactly what Jesus wanted.

Everyone, every single widow, orphan, all the marginal people, the weak, the broken, would find their places at the tables of this world. I've read somewhere that society will only heal when it takes the interests of the weak among us first, and the way to measure the greatness of any nation is to see how it cares for its weakest members. Jesus, I am sure, would have approved of those statements.

Well, is all of this terribly naïve and just a lot of pie in the sky? Can such a world ever exist? I am convinced that with the help of God and a lot of effort on our part it surely can. I don't think Jesus was preaching just to hear the sound of his own voice. My advice to all of us and especially at this time to politicians of whatever persuasion is to meditate on the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew, chapters 5,6,7) and the parable of the Last Judgment (Matthew 25:31-46). Even non-Christians can read them with profit. After all didn't Mohandas Ghandi, a Hindu, say he admired Jesus and was inspired by the Sermon on the Mount?