

Abased and Exalted

17th Sunday after Trinity

(From the *Lectionary* 1st Lesson: *Jeremiah* 13:15-21, *Gospel*: St. Luke xiv.1, and *Epistle*: *Eph.* 4:1 ff.)

Jer. 13:15 *Hear ye, and give ear ; be not proud : for the LORD hath spoken .* **16** *Give glory to the LORD your God, before he cause darkness , and before your feet stumble upon the dark mountains, and, while ye look for light, he turn it into the shadow of death, and make it gross darkness.* **17** *But if ye will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret places for your pride; and mine eye shall weep sore , and run down with tears, because the LORD'S flock is carried away captive .* **18** *Say unto the king and to the queen, Humble yourselves, sit down : for your principalities shall come down , even the crown of your glory.* **19** *The cities of the south shall be shut up , and none shall open them: Judah shall be carried away captive all of it, it shall be wholly carried away captive .* **20** *Lift up your eyes, and behold them that come from the north: where is the flock that was given thee, thy beautiful flock? **21** What wilt thou say when he shall punish thee? for thou hast taught them to be captains, and as chief over thee: shall not sorrows take thee, as a woman in travail ? [25 This is thy lot, the portion of thy measures from me, saith the LORD; because thou hast forgotten me, and trusted in falsehood.]*

..Luke 14:7 *And he put forth a parable to those which were bidden , when he marked how they chose out the chief rooms; saying unto them, **8** When thou art bidden of any man to a wedding, sit not down in the highest room; lest a more honourable man than thou be bidden of him; **9** And he that bade thee and him come and say to thee, Give this man place; and thou begin with shame to take the lowest room. **10** But when thou art bidden , go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh , he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee. **11** For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased ; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.*

Eph. 4: 1, 2: ...walk...with all lowliness and meekness...

Today's Old Testament Lesson and Gospel both reflect the theme of pride and its consequence. Jeremiah pleads with the rulers of Israel to humble themselves before God, lest the judgment that God has pronounced against them come to pass. It is a plea that is repeated over and over again, not only in this book, but throughout the prophets, and one that, for the most part, went unheeded. Jesus addresses the same attitude among the Pharisees, whose self-regard apparently knew no bounds. They automatically chose the *chief rooms* [NKJV: *best places*] when they arrived for public occasions.

In both instances, pride of place absolutely prohibited the sort of self-humiliation that would have been the only key to their salvation. Kings and queens simply *don't* humble themselves. They are, after all, royalty, and to cease to play the part invites a great deal of uncertainty, lack of respect and adoration among their subjects being chief. The Pharisees also, with few exceptions, thrived off the tremendous regard their position in their culture afforded them. They would have justified their attitude, however, by underscoring their place as guardians of the Law

of Moses. Should they flinch through any show of humility, as they may well have mused, the very Law itself might come under disrespect.

But God is well able to defend that which He Himself gave in the first place. He needs no self-appointed human agents to do the job for Him. What's more, He rejects those who have forfeited the right to call themselves His representatives through grievous sins of attitude which are directly contrary to His character and nature.

The magnitude of this sin of pride was of much greater significance and seriousness because of the role of the king and the queen, and the Pharisees, as leaders of the people. It would be enough if the consequences of one's sins were limited to their effects on one's own life. But if one has been given that very highest of charges of leading others, whether it be as ruler, or teacher, or business leader, or even parent, or spouse, responsibility for their downfall through willful disobedience to God becomes a vastly greater sin. Israel's king and queen, who lived in luxury and splendor, were implicated in the destruction of the entire nation. Had they shown a different spirit, and been willing to endure the painful exposure of humbling themselves and repenting openly of their sins, they might have forestalled or even avoided the awful judgment at the hands of foreign invaders that hung over the nation like a great sword poised to fall. Other Israelite rulers, albeit a minority, had demonstrated such a willingness, with very favorable consequences. But lessons clearly instructed by past example often seem of little significance to those who in successive generations imagine themselves somehow to be the exceptions.

In the case of Jesus and the Pharisees there is a different dynamic in place. We've already noted that the Pharisees and other national leaders of Jesus' day considered themselves to be Moses' successors. Jesus spoke of them elsewhere in this fashion (Matt. 23:2 ff.):

... The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: 3 All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. 4 For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. 5 But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, 6 And love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, 7 And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi.

The following quote from a book subtitled *The Origins of Rabbinic Authority* is very informative about the radical attitudes among leading rabbis two millennia ago:

“Even God Himself is transformed by the Rabbis and placed under their authority. He is depicted in the image and likeness of the Rabbis: [quoting a rabbinical source] ‘God keeps the commandments of the Torah, written and oral...’ God Himself studies the teachings of the Rabbis, for sometimes they are wiser than He...God is only one rabbi among many... Each day He learns something new about the Law He has given...According to the Rabbis, God Himself would obey whatever they decided...By governing the Torah [the Law], the Rabbis would govern Israel.”

Had the Pharisees humbled themselves and assumed the attitude of servant-leaders, setting a godly example as much by their actions as by their doctrine, they would have forfeited the wor-

ship they craved that was far more important to them than teaching men to love and adore God. And of far greater horror would have been the immediate necessity of acknowledging this Christ who constituted such a grave danger to their place of power and authority. But the greater good of the nation, of the people, was as of little worth ultimately to them as it had been to the king and queen several centuries previously. The rejection of Christ, Israel's Messiah, by the Jewish leaders and the masses under their direct influence, would ultimately lead to Jerusalem's destruction, which *knewest not the time of her visitation* (Luke 19:44b), the arrival of her great King.

So what really is behind our Lord's counsel to *go and sit down in the lowest room*? First, certainly, is that this universe in which we live is structured hierarchically, whether we like it or not! And at the top is One whose position will some day be acknowledged by all (*For it is written, as I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God* [Ro. 14:11]). This holds true, of course, on earth, for not all are mayors, or presidents, or CEO's, or foremen. In such a universe we are advised to tread very lightly when attempting to assess our own station. Satan is the arch example. His great fall, after presuming to occupy the very seat of God, should serve as an everlasting warning against *choosing out the chief rooms*. Secondly, to take the lowest seat is a matter of propriety and politeness. True, it is a risky business, because there always looms the prospect of being ignored, forgotten, or, worse yet, stepped on and subject to treatment as an inferior. But when self-denial stems from a spirit of humility and respect for others, it will surely demonstrate virtue and character, whether or not it results in being invited to *go up higher*. And, perchance, if the result is indeed promotion, how wonderful such an experience would be... an advancement gained with the perfectly clear conscience of knowing that one hadn't won recognition and position through grasping ambition... that sort of spirit which results in stepping on others to get ahead that is so much a part of things in our day. It would encourage *worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee*, i.e., proper respect and admiration. One can imagine the guests thinking: "This person who deliberately seated himself at the lower end of the table must be a person of real character nobility, to have been recognized and promoted by the Master of Ceremonies. The fact that he steadfastly refused to push himself forward tells us that he is a man confident in the heart and spirit he possesses, one whose existence isn't dependent upon what others think of him. If he is ignored, fine. If he is recognized, wonderful. It is a sign of his wholeness and health that he needed no more than to be merely invited to the banquet! Should any blessing be added, he receives it with pleasure and gratitude."

Finally, Christ Himself is always the best example of any virtue He preached. Though He was *the Lord of glory* (James 2:1), He came to earth, He said, *not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many* (Matt. 20:28). There could be no lower place in the scheme of

things than the one He assumed. But as a result, God the Father called Him to *go up higher*. Consider these words of St. Paul:

5 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, 7 but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. 9 Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, 11 and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (from Philip. 2)

For you and me there remains the hard discipline of learning to habitually take the lowest seat. We should do it in our marriages, in our families, in our homes, at our jobs, in any capacity in which we serve. What others do or don't do in response is outside of our power. We can do nothing about it. We cannot control the wills of others, but we have been given the mandate of controlling ourselves.

There are two contrary examples that can be set in our lives to others. One is tiringly common and constantly demonstrated, that of ambitious self-promotion. We see it so often, along with the multiple hurts that are its fruit, that we just shrug, turn away, and say, "So what's new?" The other is rare. It is lovely, attractive, and highly instructive. It is the choice that sets aside self for others' sake, and trusts God to make up the difference. It is the practice of a virtue that will become stronger each time we employ it. Since it is the true reflection of the way things actually operate in this world, in spite of any "modern and enlightened" efforts to deny it, the result will be the affirmation of the good order and wisdom that are part of the signature of God to all He has brought into existence. Its practice will always move the world away from the chaos and self-destruction to which it constantly tends, even if only to a small extent. This is surely better than nothing.

Those who know this are the real "movers and shakers" of life.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.