

Pentecost XVI

“When thou art invited to a wedding, sit not down in the first place, lest perhaps one more honourable than thou be invited by him: [...] Because every one that exalteth himself, shall be humbled; and he that humbleth himself, shall be exalted.”

– Saint Luke 14:8&11.

When the Lord in today’s Gospel saw the other guests at the Pharisee’s house clamouring for the best places at table, he took the occasion to teach us an important lesson. The Lord then speaks of a wedding banquet, which might seem odd, since the text does not say the Pharisee was holding a wedding. Nonetheless, the Lord adds this detail since, in the Scriptures, a wedding banquet is often the symbol of the joy God has prepared for his elect in heaven or for the life of the Church on earth which leads us there.

At this wedding banquet, it is good for us to be at our place and not to be yearning after another. Coveting a higher place is a trap as old as humanity – or, indeed, even older. Sacred history – or, “sacred pre-history,” if I may coin a phrase – began when some of the guests, instead of thanking the host for his invitation, began to desire a higher place.

Saint Jude the Apostle speaks in his epistle of the fallen angels “reserved under darkness in everlasting chains” who “who kept not their principality, but forsook their own habitation” (Jude 1:6). The very first sin was not the one that overthrew the peace of the earthly paradise. No – it was a sin that shook the peace of heaven itself: this great banquet hall of the everlasting King. The greatest of the angel spirits, too proud of himself, was not content with his place. And you know the terrible words that introduced war into heaven: not of course the heaven which one day would be the home of the saints but that created sphere where the angels underwent their test to merit salvation: “How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, who didst rise in the morning? how art thou fallen to the earth, that didst wound the nations? And thou saidst in thy heart: I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God, I will sit in the mountain of the covenant, in the sides of the north. I will ascend above the height of the clouds, I will be like the most High” (Isaiah 14:12-14). And we know the dread judgment pronounced by God: “And thy heart was lifted up with thy beauty: thou hast lost thy wisdom in thy beauty, I have cast thee to the ground” (Ezekiel 28:17).

Why am I telling you this? Saint Paul tells us: “our wrestling is not against flesh and blood; but against ... the spirits of wickedness” (Ephesians 6:12). The tragedy of the original fall continues to echo in each of our hearts. The concupiscence, or fallen nature, that is ours even after baptism means that we must all fight against the spirit of self-satisfaction that makes us lust after a

place other than that providence has given us. As the Collect reminds us today, we need God's grace to precede and follow all our good works. For that, we must be faithful to the vocation he gives us.

Although Scripture does not explicitly reveal the test of the angels, Saint Francis de Sales – drawing on a long tradition including Saint Bernard and others – holds that certain angels refused to adore a God who would one day unite to himself a human nature, as angelic nature in itself is superior to human. The Incarnation of Christ is thus the very opposite of the ambition of the fallen angels. The one who has really taken the last place is the God-made-man himself: “being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men” (Philippians 2:6-7).

These scrambling ambitious Pharisees at the table, these fallen ambitious demons in hell: they send us an important warning. If we want a higher place – in other words, if we want to advance spiritually – we need to grow in humility. We know this, and yet we seem to make so little progress. With God's grace, we sometimes see little progresses in this or that virtue: kindness or patience or zeal or faith. But as soon as we think we are growing in humility we have reason to fear that we are slipping into pride! But here is a little remedy that might help us: the importance of gratitude. Thanking God in our prayers of course, and also thanking those he has placed around us: our parents, our friends, maybe even our enemies.

We should not worry if someone else has a better place than we have in the king's banquet hall. After all, even being invited to the banquet is already something for which to be grateful! This invitation – I am speaking now of our baptism – is completely unmerited: it is precisely a *grace*, something freely given. Looking at the place of others – this one who is so much more clever or that one who seems to have no trouble praying – does nothing but disturb the peace of our soul. In the Church, every part has its role to play, as long as it does not get in the way by envying the role played by others. This has been forgotten by a false, inflated notion of equality: the *égalité* of the Revolution which must literally cut down everyone whose superiority to others manifests itself in any way. It is reflected even in the Church, when the creature steals for himself the worship due to God by fabricating man-centred liturgies.

The last words of today's Gospel, “every one that exalteth himself, shall be humbled; and he that humbleth himself, shall be exalted,” naturally make us think of the canticle of the Blessed Virgin, whose birthday we have just celebrated and whose Sorrows we shall commemorate in a few days. This creature, whose humility has propelled her above the choirs of angels and earned her the place Lucifer coveted for himself, sings to all generations: “He

hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble” (Luke 1:52). The liturgy speaks of Mary’s birth as the “beginning of salvation,” *salutis exordium*. It is her humility that merited for Mary to become the dawn giving to the world the Sun of Justice, “because he hath regarded the humility of his handmaid” (*ibid.*, 48). May the prayers of the humble Virgin of Nazareth obtain for us what we cannot earn by our own efforts: the joy of being faithful to the graces found only in the place God has pointed out for each of us.