

Twenty Second Sunday C 2013
The Manners of the Kingdom
Father Frank Matera

How we behave matters. This is why manners are so important. When we are invited to an important social function, we are on our best behavior—or at least we should be. We listen politely to what others say, we express an interest in what concerns them, and we try our best not to offend others by our behavior. Manners are important because they help us to live in harmony with each other. When we forget our manners, we offend and harm others.

In today's gospel, Jesus teaches us another set of manners that we might call "the manners for dining in the kingdom of God." The occasion for his teaching is a supper. Jesus has been invited to the home of a leading religious leader and he notes two things. First, everybody is scrambling for the best seat, the seat that will put them in the limelight. Second, the people who have been invited are the most prominent people in town: people of means, people of good reputation, people who give similar suppers and expect to be invited in turn.

Seizing the moment, Jesus uses this occasion to say something about another supper, the banquet of the kingdom of God. Making use of this opportunity, he teaches us the kind of manners we must learn if we hope to sit at the banquet table of God's kingdom.

Jesus warns us that when the kingdom of God comes in all its glory, there will be a great reversal of fortunes. Some who are sitting at the top will find themselves at the bottom. Some who are first now, will be last in the kingdom of God. Some who are honored and served by others now will be serving the poorest and neediest in the kingdom of God.

So what are we to do? How are we to prepare for this coming reversal of fortunes? What kind of manners do we need if we hope to sit at the banquet of kingdom of God? Jesus provides us with two answers. First, we are to cultivate the way of humility. Rather than promoting ourselves, we are to be concerned about the needs of others. Rather than exalting ourselves, we are to praise others. This of course is nonsense to the world in which we live. This makes no sense in a world that tells us to step over others in order to advance ourselves. But unless we learn to behave in this way, we will not know how to behave in the kingdom of God where the first will be last and the last will be first.

Second, Jesus teaches us not to do things for reward and praise if we hope to dine in the kingdom of God. We are not to praise others so that they will praise us in return. We are not to do good so that others will reward us in turn. Rather, we are to praise those who cannot praise us. We are to invite those who cannot invite us. Once more, this is sheer nonsense to the world in which we live. This makes no sense in a world where people expect a return for what they do. But it makes perfect sense to us, or least it should, who trust that God will reward us at the resurrection of the dead.

There are manners and there are manners. There are manners for everyday life, and we ought to observe them. But there are also manners for the kingdom of God: manners for life, manners for eating at the banquet of God's table. And unless we learn these manners, we will not know how to behave in the kingdom of God.

In celebrating this Eucharist, we enjoy a foretaste of God's kingdom. As we prepare to enter that kingdom, we ask for the grace to live in a way that corresponds to the manners of the kingdom of God.