

JAMES HAIRE
SERMON
WESLEY UNITING CHURCH, FORREST, CANBERRA
SUNDAY, 29 AUGUST 2010 / PENTECOST 14
10.30AM

READINGS: Psalm 81: 1 and 10-16

Luke 14: 1 and 7-14

TEXT: Luke 14: 11: “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted”.

1. Social - scientific background

This is a passage about social status and power. To understand it, we need to understand the world of the First Century.

First, in the world of Early Christianity, social groupings were based on kinship, ethnic issues, power, and politics. Kinship was the central factor of social organisation. The kinship group was the focus of individual loyalty, and had decisive influence over individual identity and self-awareness. The security of each individual was grounded in the community, sharing as they did common interests, values, and activities. Hence, the most basic unit of social awareness was not the individual. Individual consciousness was subordinate to social consciousness.¹

¹ MALINA, B.J. *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981, 55-66, 60-64; MEEKS, W.A. *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983, 90-91. Cf. THEISSEN, G. *Social Reality and the Early Christians: Theology, Ethics and the World of the New Testament*. Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1992, 272 – 278.

Second, religion, like other social factors, was enmeshed in kinship and politics. Membership of a religious community was not necessarily based on religious relationships, but on bonds of kinship that gave structure to religious associations. Membership in religious groups was either involuntary or voluntary. Involuntary members belonged to a religion because, for example, they were born into a particular family. Voluntary membership in early Christianity stood in contrast to family-based religion. In the first century C E the religion of voluntary members resulted in a newly-created kinship group.² Although it appeared to be similar to, or to look like, any other kinship group, it was in fact a created or fictive kinship grouping. In early Christianity, language of the natural kinship group, for example “household (of faith)”, was used for a created kinship group. Indeed, the struggle of the Christian community as a totality, for example in Rome, can be seen in relationship to these two types. It struggled as to which of these two types it in fact belonged.

Third, there is considerable evidence in the First Century C E within Greco-Roman culture of intense expressions of emotion, through outbursts of anger, aggression, pugnacity, and indeed violence. Moreover, these appear to have been socially acceptable.³

Fourth, in such an atmosphere, concern for honour and shame was significant. This was because honour determined social standing and was essential for social cooperation. Honour was the outward approval given to a group or an

² THEISSEN, G. *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (edited and translated by John H Schutz). Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982, 27-40. Cf. ESLER, P. F. *The First Christians in their Social Worlds: Social-Scientific approaches to New Testament interpretation*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994, 6 – 12.

³ PEARSON, L. *Popular Ethics in Ancient Greece*. Stanford: University Press, 1973, 193; WEDDERBURN, A. J. M. *The Reason for Romans (Studies of the New Testament and its World)*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988, 81-83. Cf. LOADER, W. R. G. *Jesus' Attitude towards the Law: A Study of the Gospels*. Grand Rapids (Michigan) and Cambridge (UK): Eerdmans, 2002, 177.

individual by others whose honour was not in question. The honour of an individual normally was dependent upon the outward approval given to one's group. On the other hand, people became shamed when they transgressed group standards or when they sought a social status to which public approval was not given. Honour was ascribed, for example, by birth into an honourable family, or by it being given or bestowed from honourable persons of power. It was acquired by outdoing others in social interchange. A person's sense of self-worth was therefore established by public reputation related to that person's associations rather than by a judgment of conscience.⁴

Over against these four factors of community life in the Greco-Roman cultures of the first century C E, Jesus summons Christians to a new form of religious organisation, a fictive kinship religious community based on identity in Christ in which membership is voluntary, and also to new social roles. These social roles are based on the twin concepts of peace or harmony, and mercy, in a complex of cultures where expressions of violence seem not only to have been common, but also accepted, as has been noted.

Over against these four factors, Jesus summons Christians to new social roles. They are based on mercy, peaceable conduct and reconciliation in a culture where expressions of violence seem to have been normative. The call for transformation now means new expressions of group identity. No longer based on kinship or ethnicity, group identity nevertheless seeks to retain the intense cohesion of former groups. Jesus' community members bind themselves together as one body in Christ. This metaphor is poignantly suitable in a society where self-awareness arises from group association rather than from individual worth. The ideals of honourable and shameless conduct are altered

⁴ MALINA, 27-48.

in that they are not primarily derived from society outside. Rather, enhanced honour for the community derives from its incorporation into its risen Lord. Patterns of social co-operation are modified as a result. A new communal identity as one body in Christ is thus reinforced.

The social groupings thus see their identity as coming from beyond themselves. Their self-understanding and their life together are defined by the kindness or mercy of God and by the truthful harmony (or peace) which God gives. The other factors in the transformation include cohesiveness within the group based on an understanding of God's action from outside. For that reason, attitudes of peaceful harmony are central to the community's identity. Moreover, no other identity marker (ethnicity, gender, class, or status) may be accepted as absolute. Honour derives from the faith-life of the community, originating from beyond. The original groupings are transformed by the new ideal of a central awareness of their relationship with God.

We thus see the radical way in which Jesus and later the Early Church took hold of Greco-Roman categories of group identity, and then applied to them new metaphors, including that of the body of Christ, so as to create in them a totally new identity. Present-day individualism makes it difficult for us to see the significance of the dynamism of Jesus' total transformation of a received aggressive culture. Moreover, throughout world history Christianity has had both success and failure in being able to present and live out this newly transformed identity in Christ.

2. Theological implications of Christ's call – it is the caller, not the called, who is significant

Dinner conversations were famous teaching settings in the Greek and Jewish world. E.g. Socrates, Plato. In Jewish and Christian tradition the banquet becomes a symbol for who is chosen and invited to the heavenly feast. Dinner discussions recur throughout this larger section, e.g. in chapters 15 and 17 until Jesus continues his journey to Jerusalem in 17:11.

The meal with the Pharisee is again a setting for a dispute **about the law**:

- vv 9-10 Jesus words reflect the traditional wisdom of Proverbs 25: 6-7.
- vv 11 Jesus places the exaltation and humbling in the context of his teaching (see 6: 20-36).
- vv 12 don't invite rich friends unless you get repaid – invite the lame and the blind. Jesus inclusion of the crippled the lame and the blind challenges the purity code of Leviticus 21: 7-23 in the light of the judgement standard at the kingdom of the resurrection of the righteous. (See also 6:23, 35, 37-38).

3. Theological implications – we become beggars so as to be called up to Christ, the only true host

Karl Barth states that the table of the heavenly banquet is the symbol of salvation at the end of history, where Christ is the host and invites all. But we come with nothing in our hands. We are all in absolute and total need of salvation. That does not mean that God despises our social status, for Christ uses the image of the house of the Pharisee. He is quite ambivalent about our social status. But we have no meaning in life apart from the salvation given by Christ who is the host of this feast. Therefore we need to be dependent on his compassion and salvation for us. If we see ourselves along with the sick and

the poor, then he calls us further up the table and he gives us our status. Any other status we may have is meaningless, that is in his eyes such status means being pushed to the bottom of the table. So our only true meaning in life is being identified with him as host of the banquet. As Luther points out in relation to Luke's gospel, we come as beggars. So, in everything which it does, the church must only and always point to him and not to itself. In this is salvation for you and for me.