

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Tell Me Where To Sit - I'm Unworthy

"Cleanliness is next to Godliness" was a motto oft-repeated to me in my grubby childhood. I have my doubts about it; but I'd be surprised if any Jewish person questioned it. Cleanliness was something Pharisees in particular raised to a fine art. It wasn't just a matter of hygiene: they were living, they thought, in a polluted, poisonous world which would, given half a chance, leak in and ruin you. Their religion was full of hazards: a single crumb in the house, the night before Passover, could disable you; the accidental touch of a passer-by, who happened to be ritually unclean, and you were scuppered. The priest and Levite who "passed by on the other side" were being ritually correct: for heaven's sake, he might have been a *corpse* - enough to put you out of action for days! This is why the guest-list for dinner was a prime black-spot for big mistakes. You could find yourself sharing your table with The Ungodly: major disaster! Luke, the evangelist for outsiders, had a particular sensitivity to this Jewish obsession with guest-lists.

Not Just Sinners, Either

It's important for us to learn that ritual "uncleanness" wasn't incurred only by contact with evil, but also by contact with the sacred. Those who broke the cordon and touched sacred things were sometimes put to death; a poor soldier who steadied the toppling Ark of the Covenant, which the priests were about to drop, was blasted with a divine thunderbolt. This is very hard for us to understand at our distance; but it survived a long time. One of the questions sent to Rome by the first Archbishop of Canterbury was about how many days British spouses should wait after making love, before coming to Holy Communion. Gregory the Great gave several pages of response! I dimly remember a very Jewish ceremony called "churching", marking the return of my mother to Holy Communion after childbirth. The idea was totally misunderstood, leaving a distinct impression that there was something shameful about the holy business of making babies; that's why the Church suspended the practice. I'm sure it was originally related to the Jewish sense that childbirth is a sacred moment, and that this should be honoured with a kind of seclusion from the ordinary. The only survival I can see of this ancient way of thinking is our referring to the little tea-towel used for the chalice after Communion

as a "purificator". To be told to "purify" a cup that has contained the Blood of Christ seems an odd thought, until you understand a little of the Jewish rules of ritual purity.

Jesus Eats With Sinners

The story of scandalized Pharisees watching Jesus' very principled practice of sharing the table with known public sinners is quite easy to understand. Psalm 26 says: *I hate the company of sinners, I refuse to sit down with the wicked*; Jesus knew those words and their consequences. It isn't exaggeration to say that "the wicked" for many Jews meant "the Gentiles"; none of us would have been welcome to a Pharisee's table. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us that Jesus ate with sinners, and that it caused scandal. I used to think that he was so confident in the power of goodness that he didn't need to defend it: on the contrary, it would flow out from him to the sinful, and they would be "infected" with goodness, not the other way about. But there is a further dimension. Jesus doesn't only share his table with sinners: he also gathers about him other ritually unclean people: the blind, the crippled, the lame were all excluded from the Temple, for instance, on the principle that applied to sacrificial victims: you couldn't offer a damaged animal or bird as a sacrifice ("not one bone of his - the Paschal Lamb - must be broken"). The Jews decided, most unfairly to our mind, that damaged people could not appear in the Lord's sight. You could not serve as a priest if you were physically impaired in any way. Jesus blatantly flouted these exclusions, touching lepers, reaching out to the sinful, dining with tax-collectors, *and dying amidst criminals*. It is there, nailed up and condemned, that Jesus appears in his Father's sight, to be the High Priest for all who live. The Evangelists drive the point home with great insistence. Perhaps the most obvious moment is in John's Gospel, where the priests stand outside Pilate's house, because if they had entered it they would have been ritually defiled *and unable to eat the Passover*. But Jesus is hustled through the door none the less. At that moment Jesus is visibly excluded from the great feast of Jewish nationhood, the festival of liberation. It is among the mightiest ironies in that most ironic of the Gospels, that Jesus redeems us in a state of ritual uncleanness. There's hope for all of us.

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