

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

How to be at Banquets

I try to avoid banquets, having a horror of being so public. So I search for something more in today's Gospel than a lesson in etiquette; and I feel sure this is right.

Banquet of Life

It was explained to me some years ago that *poverty* isn't an absolute. There are places in Surrey where "not having two cars" is poverty. And do not all of us sometimes bemoan our lack of means, when the poorest of us has access to a fine health-service? What we mean, perhaps, is that we are not *as* rich as...you name it! Who's rich in your eyes? There we have arrived at *relative* poverty. We try to draw a "poverty-line" for our society, but again it is relative. The poorest British person might be rich in a Bangladeshi street. Would not our situation look different *from outside*? It might make us less stingy with what we have, less ambitious for what we have not, and less sorry for ourselves all round, if we could acquire some of the qualities of our Bangladeshi brother, whose house is frequently washed away by floods, whose family is racked with disease, whose future is most unsure. Wouldn't our life appear as - and in fact *be* - a banquet?

Show Me To The Best Seat In The House

The human desire to sit at the top table is regarded as laudable; most people think ambition is an honourable component to a young personality. The Gospel sees things differently. *We are at a banquet* - in a place where honour and ceremony rule. As guests we should wait on the invitation of our host, so that honour may be shared respectfully among all who are invited. The beauty of the Christian view of the world is that *we are honoured in the eyes of our Lord*: we don't need to snatch dignity from the jaws of humiliation, acquire respect, or secure our rights. We display our faith in the grace of God by the restfulness which comes with assurance: precisely *not* self-assurance, but the assurance of the love of God and his justice. You are a guest; let God be the host, and wait to see what he has in his gift for you. You can hardly fear disappointment.

Go and do likewise

The mysterious humility in these thoughts gives rise to something even more surprising: living in the world where honour is not up for sale, but conferred graciously by God, makes possible the imitation of God by his humble creation. *We can come to resemble God!* We can begin to confer honour, not on the silver-spoon brigade the world honours, but on

people whose only credential may be their humanity. *Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind*, says Jesus: they can't pay you back, and this is money in the bank for you when the just are raised up. The ancient current of faith in a God whose holiness is beyond us seems here to change course, and to flow towards humanity, towards us. Other sayings come to mind: *Be compassionate, as your Father is compassionate; Let that mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus; and We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he really is*. These few instructions about good manners at a dinner-party are taking on the lineaments of the Kingdom of Heaven. When Jesus wanted to create the lasting symbol of his Gospel, his sacrifice, and his community, he chose the moment when they are gathered around the table: the breaking of the bread. The atmosphere and quality of the occasion is of vital importance: who qualifies to come to the feast in the Kingdom of Heaven? What should their meeting be like, what is appropriate to them as they respond to their host? The purpose and point of the penitential rite, the greetings, the sign of peace before communion, and the ceremony with which the liturgy unfolds, is to express the courtesy and grace of the coming of God to the earth, the indwelling of God in his people. What is done in our external, bodily behaviour must express truths that lie hidden, dispersed within the members of the Body of Christ: that palpable respect and honour for the others, which knows about the way of the Redeemer, who came to lift up the lowly.
Fr Philip