

No Upgrades at the Table of Christ!

a sermon preached on the

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Lections: Sirach 10:12-18; Luke 14:1-14

In any conversation about airline travel it's usually not long before people are talking about 'upgrades'. An 'upgrade' is apparently what most of us desire, and even the prospect of being up-graded is enough to convince us to spend money on something we don't need – or enter some competition which usually requires us to hand over personal details which will be passed on to predatory marketing agencies. Often the highlight of people's travel stories is the upgrade - from 'cattle class', as my mother says, up to 'business class'. On one occasion, while the pre-flight preparations were underway and I was strapping on my seatbelt and checking where the life-jacket was to be found, the cabin attendant came to our row, and told the woman sitting in the aisle seat next to me that she had been upgraded to a seat in business. What stands out in my memory is the fervid mutterings and the poisonous expressions on the faces of the people around me – such envy, such bitterness and displeasure that she had been upgraded, and they hadn't!

"Friend, move up higher," is the invitation that we long to hear. For thus upgraded, "you will receive glory in the face of all the other guests."¹ It might appear, on the surface, that Jesus is simply endorsing age-old conventional wisdom which has always separated humans into classes. But is this so? Most English translations tell us that the upgraded person will be 'honoured'.² The Greek word literally means 'opinion', or 'reputation'.³ It is the very same word used in the Gospels to refer to Jesus and the Father, generally translated as 'glory'. Glory is the property of the Father, and Son when he is in union with the Father. Glory is the Divine radiance which permeates them and their creative and saving action in creation, seen most explicitly and lucidly in the Cross.

As the mundane illustration from airline travel demonstrates, the problem is that reputation, honour, glory is a competition for us, a matter of intense rivalry – because there are only limited places available higher up the plane, up the table. When someone else is upgraded, therefore, I feel cheated, left out, dishonoured. This same dynamic is repeated everywhere in our culture. The heart of the problem is that we depend absolutely on someone other than us to give us our sense of worth. We have a profound need to be recognised. "We all need that someone should take note of us and tell us "I have noticed you, and I like what you are doing."⁴ Our very first experience in the world, as utterly dependent new-born, leaves us permanently vulnerable to being defined entirely according to the identity which is acquired from an other. Thereafter, my sense of "I" is something that I feel I have to fight to acquire and defend. We work so hard at doing and saying those things which we think will elicit the right responses from others, such that they will tell us that we have been noticed, and that what we are doing makes us important and good and worthwhile. Not being upgraded presses that place in us that feels like dishonour, which is linked to deep shame at being inadequate in some way. Thus, all of my "I", my sense of self-identity, is the result of acquiring and keeping my reputation. And because we have been willing to believe in an economy of scarcity, rather than God's economy of abundance, I am always in competition with you for the sake of defending and bolstering my "I", my self-identity – defending glory, the demand for which, like all other commodities in the market economy, always exceeds supply.

¹ Luke 14:10

² Jerusalem Bible; NRSV; TEV; NIV; 'respect' REB; 'worship' KJV

³ **δοξα** *doxa* what I think, and what others think of me, one who stands in good repute

⁴ Alison J, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination*, New York: Crossroad, 1996, p180.

Jesus' parable is scalpel-sharp, excising the hardened flesh covering our insecure and competitive hearts. Jesus sees the human condition with absolute clarity, because, being fully human, he knows it from the inside. Jesus must know what it is to feel rivalry towards others in the competition to win seemingly-scarce places of honour. Behind his sharp response to James and John's request for the places of glory at God's right hand there is also undoubtedly the kind of compassion which understands only too well this mortal frailty.⁵ Jesus' parable actually undermines and subverts conventional wisdom, identifying the inconvenient and uncomfortable truth – "All my "I" is nothing other than a construction forged by the difficult game of keeping my reputation."⁶ My "I" is terrified of the lowest place at the table, fearful that the humble place is no place at all.⁷

Is there a way out of this bind, this anxious striving for making and defending reputation and honour, this rivalistic and competitive way of life which is the ubiquitous coinage of our culture, this insatiable desire to be upgraded? The Gospel's answer is 'Yes!' We proclaim not upgrade - but Jesus Christ, crucified and risen! "All who exalt themselves will be humbled," says this Christ, "and those who humble themselves will be exalted."⁸ This is the way which we Christians call the Kingdom – perhaps because of that term's hierarchical overtones more helpfully called the new creation. In this new way I receive my "I" from God, rather than my "I" being something which I climb over your back to grasp at. "No longer I who live," wrote Saint Paul, "but Christ who lives in me."⁹ Gospel is the shocking and unexpected announcement that I do not find my "I" as something I fight for in rivalry with those who seem to have better seats than me. Gospel is the truly astonishing declaration that I receive my "I" from the Christlike God in whom there is neither rivalry nor competition and whose Kingdom is not governed by the enslavement of scarcity and anxiety, but by the Spirit of abundance and freedom. The only reputation, the only honour, the only glory worth that title, is that which is given, not grasped – that is to say, God's reputation, freely given to us in Christ.

But here's the rub, which when we are in our anxious marketing mode we tend to obscure – God has an awful reputation!¹⁰ God's reputation is the reputation of the slaughtered Victim! God's reputation is among the lowest of the low, the despised and rejected. God's reputation is with "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind,"¹¹ which is why they are invited to the banquet of the Kingdom, and why we are blessed by their presence. To say it the other way 'round, we have to be prepared to lose the false reputation which comes from upgrades, from gatekeepers and guardians of public morality and goodness and productivity, and instead to find the true reputation, the glory of our true "I" as those who are held as nothing, of no worth.¹²

Finally, notice the context in which all this is happening – "Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath."¹³ "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet... when you give a banquet."¹⁴ Banquet is the evangelist's code-word for the new creation, which this and every eucharist both foreshadows and actualises – and this is why it is eucharist that constitutes the church. In the sacramental Host we are shown and become and offer our true selves. My "I" is given to me, as Body and Blood of Christ – no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me! At the banquet Table of Christ there is no rivalry or competition - and definitely no upgrades! - but only our newly-created true selves, the glory of the new resurrected humanity.¹⁵ Thanks be to God!

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⁵ Mark 10:37
⁶ Alison J, p181.
⁷ Luke 14:9
⁸ Luke 14:11
⁹ Galatians 2:20
¹⁰ Alison J, p181.
¹¹ Luke 14:13
¹² Alison J, p181.
¹³ Luke 14:1
¹⁴ Luke 14:8,13
¹⁵ Luke 14:14