

Reading: Luke 14:1,7-14

Open the Bible to us, O God, in a fresh and exciting way. In Jesus' name.  
Amen

It was a routine British Airways flight between London and Johannesburg. The passengers were just beginning to settle in for the long flight. "Excuse me," said a white woman, in loud voice to the flight attendant. "I have been seated beside this black man," she pointed to the person beside her, "I don't want to spend a whole flight beside a (and then she used an n word to describe him) "I demand to be upgraded to first class." "Yes," said the attendant, "I'll speak to the captain." Sometime later the attendant came back. Only this time she ignored the woman and turned instead to the black man. "You don't need to put up with this," she said, "I have a seat for you in first class," and to the applause of the cabin she lead him to the front of the plane. And Jesus said, "When you are invited, go and sit at the lowest place."

Today Jesus is again noticing. Last week he noticed the bent over woman. Today he is noticing the guests at a wedding banquet. They are pushing and shoving to get the best seat, the place of most honour. It's like adult musical chairs. Jesus uses this as a teaching moment. "When you are invited to a banquet take instead the lowest seat, then you can be moved to higher seat later. With the words 'friend move up higher,' those who exalt themselves will be humbled and vice versa." But then Jesus pushes the point home even further. "When you give a dinner, do not invite your friends and family those who can pay you back, rather invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind - people who can't pay you back."

Jesus has this way of turning everything on its head. The biblical scholars call this the Messianic Inversion. In Jesus' kingdom those we thought were important aren't, while the very least are the important ones.

The theory is all very well but what would it look like to live like that? Would God really honour a life lived like that?

One such time, when caring for the poor and hungry was at its most challenging, was during the Irish potato famine. There were several waves of famine, and one was in 1840. While we were signing treaties, Ireland was in the grip of yet another food shortage. In a farmyard down the road from the Mount Melleray Abbey is a most curious object. It's a long wooden box about one metre deep, three metres long and a metre and a half wide. In some ways it resembles a coffin. But the monks treasure it as a symbol of life and God's provision. As a Benedictine monastery they have as part of their rule of

life the words of today's Gospel. From St Benedict they also have: "When a stranger comes bow low to the ground, greet them as if you were greeting Christ himself, even the poor, most especially the poor."

In 1840 the community of monks numbered 100, but at the door of the monastery upwards of 70 people from the village would gather each morning for food. This box was used to distribute the Meal to the poor. Just after Easter the Abbot had to go to London. He gave very clear instructions to the brothers, "While I'm away you must never stop feeding the poor. In the box is all you need." The Abbot left promising to be away just weeks. Each day the monks would feed themselves and the poor from this one box. But after weeks there was no sign of the Abbott. The brothers kept on feeding the poor and themselves from this bin. The Abbot was seriously delayed. Twelve weeks passed before he returned. He inquired of the brothers, "Did you feed the poor?" "Everyday Father," they said, "and the bin never ran out." On the bin today is a small notice. It reads: During the famine of 1840, the community and more than 70 poor people were fed daily with Meal stored in this bin. After 3 months the supply was found undiminished." The photo I saw in a book called it, "The bin of unexhausted supply."

We are so used to things running out in our world. There isn't enough money, or people, or time, we say. So this inexhaustible bin seems a tall tale.

But, what if those monks were tapping into something that doesn't run out? What if they had discovered something that, when it is given away, multiplies?

The inexhaustible supply that I refer to is God's love. The more we share it the more we have to give. The heart of God is an inexhaustible source of love. It's like a well that never runs dry. And we see it best in Jesus.

When we learn to offer hospitality from God's well of love, it doesn't run out, but it is renewed every morning. To build a community around Jesus' messianic inversion where the poor are blessed and the simple receive truth hidden from the wise, this is what church at its best looks like.

But offering and belonging to this sort of loving community has a very mysterious spin off for us. We discover that the better we are at welcoming the stranger and exalting the humble, the better we are at befriending those parts of us that we find difficult. "I asked Love to help me," writes Joy Cowley in her Psalm, *Hospitality*:

I asked Love to help me  
greet the stranger in myself.  
I knew how to open my door to the world  
and greet everyone out there as friend

but I didn't have any kind of welcome  
for the impoverished one within.  
She was the weakness I couldn't acknowledge.  
She was the pain I didn't allow.  
She was the leper I'd tried to cast out of the city,  
the one who cried at night in lonely places.  
I thought if I let her in  
she'd cause no end of problems,  
and I was afraid.

But Love helped me to prepare a feast.  
We set the table Love and I,  
and then I did it.  
I invited my stranger.  
"Answer the door", said Love.  
"You have nothing to fear."

She came in slowly.  
I put my arms around her  
and embraced her in her rags  
and we wept together for the years of separation.  
I sat my stranger at the head of the table,  
gave her the best of food and wine  
and, claiming her as my own,  
began to introduce her to my friends.  
"But who shall I say she is?"  
I whispered to Love.  
"I can't call her a stranger now."  
Love smiled and said, "Don't you know?  
She is the Christ."