

Have you ever been asked to do something, and your immediate response has been – oh I couldn't possibly do that, I'm not good enough, or I don't have the skills needed, or something along those lines? As Christians, we believe that God has a plan for each and every one of us, and the two challenges we often face are recognising what that plan is, and then believing that we are capable of doing what it is that God is calling us to do.

I remember when I started my training to become a priest, there were several of my colleagues who were very worried that they wouldn't be able to do a good job even with training. There are two very well known occasions in the bible when this also happened – one when God called Moses to lead his people out of Egypt – and Moses said, in effect, I am not a good enough speaker, but God replied, that's alright, you can take your brother Aaron and he will do the speaking for you. The second one we heard about last week when God said to Jeremiah that he had appointed him to be a prophet to the nations, and Jeremiah replied that he was too young, but God said that He would be with Jeremiah and make sure he was OK. In a similar way, during our training, when things felt really tough, we got very good at reminding each other that when God calls us to do something, he will make sure we have the skills to do what he asks.

But then there is the opposite of this. There is the situation when we look at what someone is doing, and we think, they are simply not up to the job. I remember being at a football match years ago and the striker had missed an absolute sitter – an open goal, no goalkeeper, and he had missed the target, and some wag near me shouted out, "My gran could have scored that – and she's been dead 5 years." A little harsh maybe, but you get the point. I wonder if there are times when you think, I could do a better job than him or her?

So, I wonder what the right approach to take is – should we doubt our skills and say we can't do something, or should we risk it and put ourselves forward for something which might simply prove to be beyond us? I think the answer to this, these days in particular, but perhaps this is nothing new, is heavily affected by how other people see us – or perhaps even, how we want to be seen by other people. Are we happy being seen as the under confident, perhaps apparently under achieving, quiet person, who just gets on with their own lives, or do we want to be seen as an almost super person who is capable of whatever anyone throws at them? Should we be humble, or should we be bordering on the arrogant?

In our gospel reading this morning we continue to follow Jesus as he is on the road to Jerusalem where he knows he is going to be killed and three days later he will rise again. At various times he has healed people, and we heard about one of the occasions last week: a woman who had been crippled for 18 years. But he healed her on the Sabbath and the Pharisees were not happy with what Jesus was doing because they didn't think, according to their strict interpretation of the laws, that Jesus should heal someone on the Sabbath.

And the reason I mention that is just before the story in this morning's reading, Jesus does the same thing again; he heals a man who was suffering from an illness called dropsy and again Jesus healed him on the Sabbath knowing full well that this would wind the Pharisees up.

And this happened in the house of a Pharisee where Jesus had been invited to eat, which was not going to make him terribly popular with his fellow guests. Then we get to today's episode which is all about humility.

Let's try and picture the scene. Let's imagine this is in the Pharisee's house. The guests would be reclining on couches; maybe four people on a couch. At the centre point of the layout would be the most important person or people present – perhaps the pharisee who had invited people to this meal. In the case of a wedding, it would be the bride and groom. Now a significant point about these meals is,

apart from the food being very nice, so much of it was to do with social standing. The expectation would be that the Pharisee would have invited to this meal people of a similar social standing to himself but within that group of people there would have been massive competition as to who was highest up in the pecking order – it was just how they were, they were very competitive - and Jesus saw this: we are told, “he noticed how the guests picked the places of honour at the table.”

So, having already healed that man on the sabbath, you can imagine the tension in the room. We don't know what the trigger was, but Jesus didn't like what he was noticing in terms of this competitiveness, so he told them a parable. A parable is a story that Jesus made up in order to make a point – it was one of his main methods of teaching. Let's assume that Angela is the most important person in the room so when you guys arrive you want to get as close to Angela's seat as you can because that shows you are the next most important person in the room. So (pick closest person) you have made that decision. You have gone to couch 2. I am now the host and I spot that (pick someone) has arrived, and they are clearly more important than you, so I ask you to move. You were on couch 2, but I'm afraid the next available place is on couch number 43. So off you go. Couch number 2 is a really important place, couch number 43 is – well where is it even. And how do you feel? Rotten.

So what Jesus is saying is when you arrive go and sit on couch 43, and when I as host see you there, I will ask you to move up to where I think you should be – and even if that is only couch 11, you will feel much better having been promoted up 32 places than having been relegated 41.

But the point that Jesus is making we are told in verse 11, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” What he's saying is if you walk in and you say I'm important and I'm going to sit where I think I should be then you will be humbled because that is not how you should behave, but if you go in and you sneak quietly at the back in a very humble way, you may well be moved to a better place, and that's how we should live. We should be humble. We shouldn't big ourselves up; we shouldn't be focusing on making ourselves feel, and appear to be, important. It's what we do that matters not whether anyone sees us doing it. And I won't stand here and claim that that is anything but difficult to actually do. But why is it so important?

The answer is in the second part of this story. “Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” I don't think Jesus is in anyway saying it is wrong to invite your brother or sister for dinner; what he is saying is if you're inviting people round for dinner do it because you want to do it not because you expect something in return. Back in Jesus' day if this prominent Pharisee invited you to a meal, you would be expected to invite him back: it's almost a requirement of you accepting the invitation to the meal, and what Jesus is saying is that is wrong. You should be doing whatever it is because you want to, not because you expect something in return. It's that humility thing again. It's learning how to live how God wants us to and asking God for help when we are unsure what to do.

How then does that help us to answer that question I posed a bit earlier? Should we be humble, or should we be bordering on the arrogant? You would think from this story that the answer would be, “Be humble”, but actually I would suggest the answer is more likely, “Be prepared to be humble.” There are times in life when it is necessary for someone to put their hand up and say, “I can do that”, and even when others look slightly misbelieving at you, with that, “yes, of course you can” (very sarcastically), it is the right thing to do to stick to your guns and have a go. But, the question you must ask yourself at this point, and this is the point Jesus was making, is, “Why have you just put your hand up?” Is it because you think this could make you look good, is it perhaps because you think, whether you can actually do

the job well or not, it could very financially beneficial to you, or is it because you genuinely think you could, perhaps with suitable help, do what is required? If it's that last one then what we are told, as Christians, is that if this is something God wants you to do then God will provide that help you need.

Now what you are doing is focussing on the task in hand – and going back to who Jesus said you should invite to your banquet you are helping those who need it, and that surely is what God is calling us all to do, this day, and every day. I said at the beginning of this talk that as Christians we believe that God has a plan for each and every one of us – but behind that plan is the requirement that we should love God – and that we should love each other. That is what was not happening at the Pharisee's meal – but should always happen at ours.

Amen