

Church of Our Saviour Santa Barbara, Holy Communion, Trinity XVII

The Epistle and Gospel appointed: EPHESIANS IV. 1-6 AND S. LUKE XIV:1-11

*The Collect: Lord, we pray thee that thy grace may always prevent and follow us,
and make us continually to be given to all good works; through Jesus Christ our
Lord. Amen.*

This week, while thinking about our homily, I happened to receive Taylor Caldwell's 1959 novel *Dear and Glorious Physician*, about Saint Luke.

In her foreword, Caldwell explains that the book had been a lifelong project. She first became interested in Saint Luke when she was about twelve years old and attempted a version of the story again in her twenties. She returned to it repeatedly before finally publishing it many years later. The depth of her research, together with material gathered during her husband's travels in the Holy Land, shows that this was much more to her than simply another successful novel.

We may glimpse what she believed about that work in the epigraph she chose from Epictetus: "*Surely God chooses His servants at birth, or perhaps even before birth.*" Caldwell seems to have believed that she had been given a particular vocation—to tell the story of Saint Luke.

A Calling Received

That idea of a calling given before we fully understand it brings us naturally to today's lessons. Caldwell draws an interesting parallel between Saint Luke and Saint Paul. Neither knew Jesus during His earthly ministry. Paul encountered Him in glory on the road to Damascus. Luke came to know Him through the witness of those who had seen, heard, and followed Him. Paul received the Gospel by revelation; Luke received it through careful investigation and faithful companionship with the Church.

Neither man began by occupying the obvious place of honour. Paul began as a persecutor of Christ's people. Luke was not one of the Twelve and did not stand among those who had followed Jesus through Galilee. Yet both were chosen to serve. Their authority did not arise from pushing themselves forward. It came from receiving the place God gave them.

The Cup of Salvation

I am reminded of Psalm 116's wording regarding those who put pride of position over the humility of service. The Psalmist asks, "*What reward shall I give unto the Lord for all the benefits that he hath done unto me?*" His answer is not that he can repay God as an equal. He says, "*I will receive the cup of salvation, and call upon the Name of the Lord.*"

He repays God by receiving. He receives the cup of salvation, gives thanks, and calls upon the Lord's Name. That is the posture of humility. We do not manufacture a gift worthy of God. We receive what God gives, and then offer thanksgiving.

This is also the meaning of the Eucharist. The ancient Church understood the Eucharistic meal first as thanksgiving for the gifts God had provided. The word *Eucharist* itself means thanksgiving. We bring bread and wine, but these gifts have first come from God. We offer ourselves, but our very lives are received from Him. At the altar, therefore, we do not claim a place; we are invited to one.

Spiritual Dropsy

Saint Luke's Gospel gives us the same truth in another form. Our Lord notices how the guests choose the highest places at the feast. He warns them not to exalt themselves, lest they be humiliated, but to take the lower place and wait to be called higher.

That is not merely advice about social manners. It is a picture of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is not seized. It is received. The place of honour is not claimed by the person who thinks he deserves it, but given by the master of the feast.

And before our Lord teaches about the banquet, He heals a man suffering from dropsy. The order is significant. First comes the swollen body; then comes the warning about the swollen soul.

The Psalmist says of the proud, *“Their eyes swell with fatness.”* Pride is a kind of spiritual swelling. The self becomes enlarged until we can no longer see clearly. We see other people as rivals, inferiors, or obstacles. We see our own gifts as possessions rather than mercies. We forget that everything we have has been received.

The opposite of pride is not self-hatred. It is truth. Humility is seeing ourselves accurately before God: dependent, sinful, gifted, called, and loved. It is knowing that whatever place we have in the Church, in the world, or in eternity will be given by grace.

Called Higher

Saint Paul had to be humbled before he could understand his vocation. Saint Luke had to receive the testimony of others before he could become its faithful recorder. The Psalmist had to ask what reward he could possibly give unto the Lord before discovering that the proper answer was to receive the cup of salvation.

And so we come to the altar. We do not come because we have earned the first place. We come because Christ has invited us. We receive the cup of salvation and call upon the Name of the Lord. We take the lower place, and we wait for God to say, *“Friend, go up higher.”*

There will be glory, but it will be the glory of grace. The face of Christ will humble us more deeply than we now imagine, even as it raises us higher than any dream. The last shall be first—not because the last have forced their way forward, but because the Lord, in His mercy, has called them.

Let us pray that God’s grace may go before us and follow us, making us continually ready for the good works to which he calls us.

Lord, we pray thee that thy grace may always prevent and follow us, and make us continually to be given to all good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.