

PENTECOST XIV 2010 - Bruton Parish Church
University Service – Sunday, August 29, 2010
The Rev. John Maxwell Kerr

As it happens, and for reasons the likes of you could not possibly begin to understand, I am something of an expert on snobbery. (That, by the way, may be an example of British humour, but then again, maybe it's not)

Snobbery is a greatly widespread, nearly universal, evil, though it does not appear in the official list of the Seven Deadly Sins. There are lots of kinds of snobbery. Wine snobbery, for instance: all that posturing and posing, sniffing, and gargling by people who really measure the quality of wine by its price on the wine-list. Or James Bond: the other night I watched a few minutes of that old Bond film "Goldfinger" with Sean Connery: it's just full of wine snobbery, one could watch it for that alone. Dom Perignon '55 must be served at exactly 38 degrees Fahrenheit: HAH!

Of course there is also educational snobbery and its inverse, envy. You are at the College of William and Mary. Others are not, poor dears. Tempting. Tempting to play that game.

We British may have perfected social snobbery but we certainly did not invent it, " *Odi profanum vulgus, et arceo,*" as the Roman poet said: "I loathe the common people and shun them." You know the ones? "Strangers." "The poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind?"

"Oh, you don't want to go inviting them. They dress so badly, so unfashionably. They smell, even, or perhaps especially, the ones who have heard of deodorant. Heavens, some are even foreign. What could they contribute to witty dinner-table conversation? What gossip could they share about people we know? They don't know people we know. They would only come to a dinner party to eat, because they're hungry."

Snobbery is meant to demonstrate superiority and is meant to generate envy. Does it work? I am told that there are still in existence people called "society hostesses" who give cocktail parties and dinner parties in your nation's capital and other places. They tell me there is such a thing as "the A List." Have you heard of this? Perhaps you are on it, or aspire to be. This is a list of people supposed to be important and it is thought to be a great triumph if you can get them to come to your dinner.

How does one get to be on an "A List?" I fear some of you would like to know. By being a brilliant conversationalist? Extremely wealthy? Congressman? Ambassador? People like us, in any case. PLU = people like us, or perhaps, people we would like to be like. People like our "friends, or our brothers, or our relatives, or rich neighbours". Some on the "A List" are mere celebrities, known solely for being known, for appearing on television. But the important thing, all that matters, is that they are on the

"A List"; to stoop to having to invite someone on the "B List" would be too, too shame-making.

But these parties. These snobbish people. These are useful people. Useful for business connections. Useful, though perhaps very dull. Why would one go to a dinner party, or give one, simply for pleasure? It's all about networking, often transparently, pathetically so. You schmoosh with the famous. Shake them warmly by the hand. Then, the next week, you can say, "I never drop names but as I was saying to the Queen only the other day..."

I'm not sure I should tell you this, but you will see its total relevance at once. One of my best friends when I was an undergraduate was definitely an "A List" sort of person. She was the Honourable Carol whatnot, always being invited to parties and dinners because she was an aristocrat and was dazzlingly beautiful. And she knew it. She was a girl friend, not a girl-friend, if you see the distinction; wonderful friend, great fun, wicked sense of humour. For years, Carol used to invite me to go with her to dances and these dinner parties. I used to go because you never knew what she would do next. Amazing. At one very snobbish, boring, stuffy formal dinner; black tie, smooth people all trying to impress one another about how important they were and who they knew, that sort of thing, suddenly Carol belched. Belched deliberately and really loudly. Total shocked silence. Then she turned on her ultra-radiant smile and beamed at everyone: "Oh. Pardon me. I meant to yodel." Then we left. She went on to become a Catholic nun: I bet she was wonderful. I never met a less snobbish person, one who was so close to the Christ of tonight's Gospel.

And that brings us to the subject of manners. Now, when I was brought up, manners were described as acting in such a way as to make others comfortable. That's why we don't chew with our mouths open. That's why one never talks with one's mouth full. That's why one never holds one's knife as if it were a pen: HKLP: = "Holds knife like pen" a dead give-away that the person is not quite one of us, dear, not quite PLU.

I even taught in a school whose motto was "Manners Makyth Man" but the school was founded in 1382 by William of Wykeham who rose from being a peasant from the village of Wykeham to being Bishop of Winchester and the Lord Chancellor of England. "Manners makyth man" isn't at all about not eating your peas with honey, though you've done it all your life (it makes the peas taste funny, but it keeps them on your knife.) This fourteenth-century motto is quite revolutionary, not least for being in English rather than Latin, and it fits perfectly with this evening's Gospel reading, and the Epistle [Lk 14:1, 7-14; Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16].

The motto means that it is who you are, the quality of the person you are, your character, and not your social rank, which determines your worth as a person.

In the end, it means who you are when you stand before God with every prop and posture stripped away. At that moment, you look around and find out to your surprise who is on God's "A List." Illegal immigrants, children from Somalia, Larry the Leper, Tilly the tart, Ralph the Republican, Dennis the Democrat. God seems not to recognize the characteristics of the "A List." God appears not to be a snob. Certainly Jesus wasn't and, if one aspires to anything, surely it is best to be of the same opinion as Jesus on this. But tonight's Gospel also suggests that Jesus wasn't all that struck by conventional manners. Look what he says to his host. Telling one's host off for his guest list is, perhaps, slightly less shocking than belching but it shows that Jesus also was not intimidated by an A-List clique of dinner-party guests. Therefore, nor need we be.

I think snobbery's rotten heart is brought about by a failure of imagination, a failure to live by what's important about people, a failure of humanity. "Better to associate strictly with people like us. Best to stick to the A-List," they say. You can do that, of course, but it betrays a real poverty of soul. And that poverty may mean that at the resurrection of the righteous, one will be left standing on the outside looking in at the Heavenly banquet.

For ever? Not sure about forever. If you are on the outside at the resurrection of the righteous, that might reveal you to be one of the emotionally poor and imaginatively crippled, the morally lame and those self-blinded by snobbery. Maybe at that point one would qualify to be invited in by our Host, our Lord, to join those with whom would never have dreamt of dining in this life. Maybe, but best, perhaps, not to count on it.

Did I mention that there is a dinner party after this service? Do come. As with the Eucharistic feast, it is Christ who invites us all and he is no respecter of persons. And for that, thanks be to God.