

Blessed are those called to the wedding feast

11 October 2020

28th Ordinary Sunday of the Year



Gospel

Matthew 22.1-14

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’ But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. “But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Homily

Weddings have become fragile and fraught events in our present experience of living with what remains a life-threatening infection. For so many couples, their families and their friends, a wedding celebration may be on one minute, off another, rescheduled or reimaged from the event they longed and hoped for and transformed into something far smaller and less full of exuberance and happiness. We must keep them all in our prayers – that as they promise their futures to one another they may feel the special sense that God is no less with them in present circumstances than he will be in better times in the future.

But imagine then, the *shock* of the king in our gospel reading who, having prepared his son’s wedding banquet, and invited guests to what would be an epoch-making event, affecting everyone’s future when the son became king, gets cold-shouldered by *everyone* he had invited. A wedding feast was a familiar image to Jesus’s listeners – not just any wedding feast, but the feast of God’s wedding to his people – an image of God’s *covenant* with his chosen bride-people, and of the *kingdom* God’s people would enjoy together. Luke’s telling of this story (14.16-24) is very similar to Matthew’s, but is much more lifelike. Matthew’s version, which we’ve just heard, is much less so. It has a very different tone and energy. Luke’s telling of it occurs much earlier in Jesus’s ministry, and is told to lawyers and pharisees. Matthew’s telling is the last of three parables (ch. 21.28—22.14) which we have heard as the Sunday gospel over the last few weeks, that is

told to the chief priests and elders. They are precisely those people who – within two or three days – will have engineered Jesus’s show-trial and crucifixion. As a result Matthew’s version has about it not only a sense of urgency – “Come to the wedding! Everything is ready! It’s about to spoil! Come and share!” – it is also full of menace, even anger. Jesus knows that the pan is about to boil over, and he is ready, as we say in the eucharistic prayer, ‘to enter willingly into his passion’.

2

The parable is a kind of allegory about all the different ways in which human beings, who quite plainly hear God himself calls them, nonetheless scorn or reject that call, cold-shouldering the invitation to new life. At least *five* times the verb *καλεο* (*kaléo*) occurs, a word that means a *bold* invitation, a *loud* call, a *direct* summons to a person. God has *not hidden* his invitation to life and light and love from any human being – which is why *mission* is so crucial an aspect of the Church’s identity. God summons us to *share* in the wedding, *γάμος* (*gámos*), a word that occurs *seven* times. *Sharing with others* in present joy and future promise is right at the very heart of God’s invitation.

And yet, and yet ... such extraordinary good news receives incomprehensibly cold responses from those who are called. Set as this story is early in what we call Holy Week, it is impossible not to see all this converging on the rejection and killing of Jesus himself.

As with some of Jesus’s other parables there are layers of meaning as to *why* God’s call is rejected, who God calls instead, and the different attitudes of those who do finally respond. In a longer homily we could think about those attitudes and how much of them we each see in ourselves.

- There’s the plain *refusal of God*: the decision to reject out of hand what God’s *grace* offers us on top of what his *goodness* has already given us
- There’s *neglect of one’s own interests*: living for years with an exasperating slowness, without urgency, without fire or passion in life. ‘Why do today what can be left until tomorrow?’
- There’s sheer *laziness*: leaving to *others* the task of faith, evading the inconveniences of discipleship; escaping responsibility, and avoiding being ourselves before God
- There’s *presumption*: being concerned entirely with one’s *self*, and one’s *own* priorities, avoiding the new and painful things about ourselves which God’s light exposes. We prefer the anesthetic of ‘not thinking’ too deeply
- There’s *aggression and violence* in word and deed. The parable exposes that some people react with boiling frustration to the fact that God pursues us and insistently intrudes in our lives, that for others the hurts and sufferings of their lives remain unresolved, and the behaviour of some toward others may be irrationality aggressive
- And finally there’s *disconnectedness*: the one who doesn’t connect with what he’s doing (that’s the man with no wedding garment). Such a person turns up to the wedding feast but does not engage with the meaning of the new life that he’s been invited into. There are plenty of such people in church, are there not? People who try to be Christians without true repentance; without a life of good deeds; without passing the good news to their neighbours and families?

The chief priests and elders listening to Jesus simply did not recognise – despite the fact that their plans to arrest Jesus are well underway – that this ordinary human being who stands before them is not only unpacking to their faces their *own refusal* of God, but that their reaction to him will decide their own fate.

Perhaps you or I would have been equally blind? Or perhaps we’re more like the man with no wedding garment, who simply goes along with the crowd, and never understands the invitation he had responded to. Instead, when the king enquires, he is silent and he loses his chance of life.

3

But let us end this meditation of Jesus’s words with a reminder of what it is that he *so urgently* invites us to share. We do so, of course, now, with the hindsight of everything that followed: the death and resurrection

of Jesus, the growth of the Church, and centuries of dependence of the word of God and the Eucharist to guide and teach and nourish it. With all of that to guide our thoughts, we can see something extraordinary, which Jesus's hearers could never have seen.

You all know the saying, 'Always a bridesmaid; never a bride'. The covenant that Jesus sealed by the death he willingly embraced, and by the power of his resurrection, was a new covenant – a wedding – with all who are baptized into it, and a new and eternal life that floods the entire universe. And as a result you and I are not invited to be *guests*, well-dressed onlookers, at Christ's wedding, however knowingly and faithfully. We are not attendants *someone else's* celebration, witnesses to *someone else's* union. We, dear friends, *are the bride!* It is *our* wedding we are invited to! The Eucharist is the wedding feast of our unity with the Lord, in body and soul in an eternal covenant, an eternal joy, throughout our lives 'for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health', a life together that death can *never* part. We need only to receive God's call from an open heart, to be flooded by *his* life so that it is 'born' in us every bit as much it was in the Virgin Mary and all the saints who, in every age, have understood that 'Nothing is impossible with God'. The question is, will we *accept* God's invitation and welcome? Will we *embrace* unity with Christ, who has promised he will never let us down, and never let us go?