

28TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, A
THE LORD'S BANQUET AND UNTENABLE EXCUSES

"The wedding is ready; but as those who were invited proved unworthy, go to the crossroads in the town and invite everyone you can find to the wedding"
(Matt. 22: 8, 9).

Today we listen to the third of Matthew's presentation of Jesus' trilogy on the Kingdom of heaven. Jesus presented these in the temple precinct a few days to His death. He was aware of what was about to happen to Him: the obstinacy to His people was fast closing in on its apogee; the plotters' hatred was overflowing with venom, and their anger was running out. Using different allegoric parables, Jesus took these last moments to tell them the most poignant of truths about their age-long impervious and stubborn attitude to the messages of the prophets, the ministry of John the Baptist and His teachings and miracles. These parables as we have seen these last three Sundays refer to the chief priests, teachers of the Law, the scribes and the Pharisees of the time of Jesus as much as they are relevant to us in the twenty-first century. It is unfortunate that with the enormity of knowledge available to us, we have not moved far from the excesses and the mistakes of the early century Judaism.

The Readings of today's liturgical celebration, especially from Isaiah (25: 6-10) and Gospel (Matt. 21: 1-14) tell us about the banquet of the Lord. In Isaiah, the banquet is on the mountain, and rightly so, because the mountain is the place of an extraordinary encounter with the Lord – remember the significance of the Mount Sinai to the Chosen People and Horeb to Elijah; the mountain was most often Jesus' unique place of prayer. It has a nuance of seclusion and silence to be "alone with The Alone." This banquet is for "all people", including the Jews and Gentiles alike. In Jesus' parable, the master sent for the servants to collect the "bad and good" people to fill the banquet hall. The descriptive presentation by Isaiah makes the banquet the most delicious of all: "a banquet of rich food, a banquet of fine wines, of food rich and juicy, of fine strained wines." It implies that the banquet would be an eternal banquet with all these food and wines supplied in indefinite quantity because the Lord "will destroy Death forever." It will be a festive banquet because "The Lord will wipe away the tears from every cheek" and take away His people's shame.

It is the idea of this eternal banquet that Jesus captures in His Parable of the Wedding Feast. And His listeners, especially the chief priests, the teachers of the Law, the scribes and the Pharisees, whom He was explicitly addressing, knew this

prophecy of the Lord's banquet by Isaiah because they were very familiar with the Old Testament. God initially invited the Jewish people as His Chosen People – they represent the guests in this parable. At different times God sent His prophets to prepare them, sent John the Baptist to bid them “prepare a way for the Lord”, but their hearts would not budge. God sent His Son, as the Messiah they were waiting for, but they still would not turn their hearts to believe in Him. Thus, they intentionally refused the invitation with unreasonable and insolent RSVPs – “one went off to his farm, another to his business, and the rest seized his servants, maltreated them and killed them.” Out of fury, and because they proved to be unworthy, the master sent out the invitations across the streets, thoroughfares, crossroads of the town. He thus opened the doors to everyone, the “bad and good alike.” These represent sinners, Gentiles and all those who never expected the Lord to invite them to the Kingdom. So, how do these apply to us? Where do we find ourselves?

God's Invitation is to Joy: Psalm 16: 11 says: “In the presence of the Lord there is fullness of joy.” It is this joy that is our strength (Neh. 8: 10) to enable us carry the crosses that must come in an uncomplaining manner and accomplish the tasks set for us. Christianity is not a gloomy journey, for no matter the cross, when we carry it with the Lord, He makes our yoke easy and our burdens light. Christianity is a journey of joy, peace and love with and in the Lord. Therefore, make the Lord your daily companion, and you never walk alone.

God's Invitation is to All with individual Freedom of Choice: God has called us from the trenches of our sins and unworthiness. The master sent out his servants to get the “bad and the good alike” from the broad and easy way of damnation to the narrow path that leads to life (Matt. 7: 13-14). He called us while we were still sinners, undeserving and unworthy. Yet He does not compel us. The response is our choice to make. What can prevent us from responding with eagerness and love?

Beware of Untenable Excuses: The excuses of those invited were for something good. But they were not tenable. How easy it could be for us to be busy with the good things of life, but we forget the best things we need to live; to be engaged with things ephemeral that we forget things eternal; to be preoccupied with the now that we forget the future. Can you imagine how easy we could be so attentive to the noises of this world that we become deaf to the voice of the whispering gentle breeze with which the Lord calls us? These things could constitute our untenable excuses if we give them undue and disproportionate attention to the neglect of the essential things we need in life to live.

My dear friends, God's invitation is a call of grace. None of us is worthy, but He makes all things beautiful for us at His time. We have to seek God's grace and to cooperate with that same grace to be able to respond positively to this salvific call. The grace of God, which enables us to live good lives and perform good deeds is the "wedding garment" we must always wear in our souls so that whenever the call comes, we shall not be bound and thrown out into the dark. Therefore, never be too busy with the work of the Lord to forget the Lord of the work. It is the will of the Father that none of us should be lost (Jn. 6: 39).