



28th Sunday (A) October 12, 2008

Isaiah 25:6-10a Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20

Matthew 22:1-14 (or 1-10)

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COME TO A PARTY!

Jesus has been called “the man of sorrows.” This is an appropriate title for him. He knew what it was to be poor, hated, persecuted, and forsaken as few of us will ever know, even if we thought in our worst moments we could match him. He knew what it was to die in disgrace in a way he didn’t deserve, a common criminal. It is unlikely any other human being has felt the tragic side of life more acutely than he. This is, however, only a partial view of Jesus.

He can, with equal truth, be portrayed as a man of joys. He rejoiced in the world of nature, finding more beauty in wild flowers than in the splendid garments of kings. He was strongly attracted to little children and they to him. Children do not cozy up to a person who does not smile, so we can assume he had a genuine smile. He mingled freely and frequently with unsavory companions because he cared for the marginalized people of his time. Rough and tumble crowds do not welcome the friendship of frowning saints. His critics called him a drunkard and glutton. He was neither, but the very accusation is evidence that he was no kill-joy. People who spread gloom all over the place are not likely to be enthusiastic dinner companions or pleasant company.

This festive spirit of Jesus is highlighted in the parable of today’s Gospel. He told a story about the kingdom of God, living life God’s way. He compared this kingdom to a royal wedding feast, something to be celebrated and enjoyed. Many of Jesus’ contemporaries did not think of the spiritual life in those terms. They saw religion as a stern obligation to be carried out vigorously. Jesus’ view was different. Living under the authority of God was to be considered a privilege, like being invited to a banquet. This is not to suggest that living our

faith can always be fun. It was not that way for Jesus, never has been, and never will be for anyone who shares a commitment to him. Even this feast, with all its intended joy, has its dark side.

As you have heard me say from this pulpit many times, parables are stories with elements one can identify with as real and other elements which are unreal. Their purpose is to catch one's attention and to make one think about what is real. To me a modern day parable is the film "ET" with its questionable reality and yet its beautiful moral for kids of all ages. Another is the film, now a classic as well, *Babette's Feast* in which an impoverished fine cook made her way to a small town where the religion of the area had made the people hard and cold to each other, even to the point of not wanting to relate to each other. Babette had only a small stash of possessions, but she was a top chef. Circumstances permitted her to do some very special for this group, at her own expense. She prepared over a period of days, a huge delectable, and exquisite feast. As those present began, at first hesitantly and reluctantly, to taste and enjoy, they began also to communicate in kindness to each other. They even danced a scandalous thing before the meal.

Some people say that this movie promotes self-indulgence, and an attack on serious religious practices. If you like films, and haven't seen the film, get it, then judge. I still find it refreshing in these hard times. It carries a message similar to the huge feast we hear about in the First Reading. Isaiah invites us to a huge feast, "a feast of rich food and choice wines." It is a great feast, a feast that "will destroy the veil that veils all peoples," and "will destroy death forever," wiping away "the tears from every face." What promise! What hope! – when things are difficult.

In the Second Reading, we hear Paul say, "In every circumstance and in all things I have learned the secret of being well fed and of going hungry, of

living in abundance and of being in need.” How? He says the he “can do all things in him who strengthens me.”

For the Gospel’s message, Jesus tells a story about a wedding feast. There were lengthy preparations for it. Invitations were sent out long before the actual date so that people had plenty of time to arrange schedules so as to be present. Family members, long-time friends, close counselors of the court, dignitaries from other countries. No ordinary party. It was the wedding of the king’s son, heir-apparent to the throne. One might think that all who got the invitation would be thrilled. This was to be the affair of the year, a cancel all other plans, RSVP of the highest order. Instead those on the guest list simply ignored the invitation. No reply, no regrets, no excuses. It was insulting, and especially to one so important.

Jesus tells this story using the extreme to press his point. God graciously invites us *to the feast of grace that is the life of faith*, and we are aware of how many times in life we and so many simply shrug our shoulders, indifferent and at times angry at what is put in front of us, what we have to deal with in daily life.

This father in this parable was not an angry Father, one to be feared, a ruthless, inconsiderate judge, and hateful. The Father whom Jesus presented to the world is one who is patient and kind, loving and forgiving in the face of being insulted. It is this image which Jesus wishes to convey as one can see who follows the rest of the story closely.

Those first invited ignored the invitation. After being snubbed, the king sends his servants to the same invitation list, this time with an even more personal invitation. He is serious about his son’s wedding being a celebration, and he knows the joy would be tarnished if not shared with a wide group.

Despite reaching out in this way for the sake of the celebration for his son, this time those invited underscore their refusals by giving such excuses as “I

can't come that day. I have relatives coming into town." Or: "My work schedule prohibits my coming. I have to work overtime that day and can't make it." Or "Is there room to park my camel somewhere conveniently?" We may choose to laugh but sometimes our excuses can be just as stupid when it comes to giving the Lord time to share in the feast of his love offered us in our daily lives. How often we, all of us, consider our plans, our priorities, our agendas more important than God's invitation to grow more deeply in love with him, responding to the love he has shown us first? It could be that we misunderstand that God is inviting us to parties, life-changing events of consolation, and eternal joys especially in regard to sharing in his special feast which is our Eucharistic celebration, a feast that identifies us as belonging to him in a special way. What a patient God we have who simply will not give up on us with our feeble excuses. He waits at the table for us to come, will not fill our spot with another unless we so choose.

What does this king do with all these rebuffs? He does get angry and he does take action against the rebuff. But offers a final surprise, something his listeners and we would not expect in the situation. He responds with even more grace. He is determined to fill the hall with a joyful celebration for this wedding, so he sends the servants into the streets with the surprise invitation to those who would have never imagined being invited to enter the king's courts, much less for a royal wedding. He invites common people, slaves, sinner, strangers. He doesn't focus on the rejection of those first invited as he focuses on opening his doors to new people.

This by the way is a passage which has been over the centuries used to hit the rejection of the Jewish people of their Messiah – and even been the source of anti-Semitism in the minds of some – rather than what Matthew is purported to want his readers to focus on: namely, *the message of the Lord is meant for everyone*, Gentile as well as Jew. Parables are open-ended stories which are

meant to make us think and decide. Sometimes we have to think a little harder to come up with what the Lord wants to say to us.

We might keep Paul's words in today's readings in front of us on such occasions. He says: "*I know how to be well fed and to go hungry, how to live in plenty and in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*" And there is the beautiful Shepherd Come responsorial psalm. A Shepherd is one who gives courage and confidence to his sheep; and this is our Lord.

God as our priority is not something we can ignore. Note that when all are in the festive hall, one is without a proper garment. Again this is jolting to us but rich or poor a wedding garment was expected and had by the guests. What it says is that while God is compassionate to us in our weaknesses, there is an expectation that where we recognize God working in our lives we have the responsibility to respond to those gifts offered.

With all that God has given us, is there anything that is too much to give back with as much love as has been shown in his giftedness toward us. So many of us have been given so much, we have to be careful about taking so much for granted. The life of any parish depends upon the spiritual strength of its members. You and I are that strength. And with Paul we need to come to this weekly feast prepared to celebrate with the Lord and each other, - to hear the Lord, to receive him into our hearts, and be nourished enough to carry him to others in the parish and outside of it. One cannot do it, but *together we will* grow to be a powerhouse of the Lord's love in this parish and in this world which is ours to care for.

What garment do we wear to feast with the Lord and his company? Paul recommends time and again one thing: prayer – serious, genuine, heartfelt prayer. There are so many beautiful prayers composed by others, though, in truth, the most beautiful prayers are those that flow consistently from within ourselves. I wish to conclude with one by a Jesuit, Blessed Peter Faber, which

may spark that special prayer in each of our hearts and invite us to more prayer and much more than just prayer:

*Jesus Christ, may your death be my life
and in your dying may I learn how to live.
May your struggles be my rest,
your human weakness my courage,
your embarrassment my honor,
your passion my delight,
your sadness my joy,
in your humiliation may I be exalted.
In a word, may I find all my blessings in your trials.
Amen.*