

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

These verses of Matthew's Gospel today immediately precede the account of Jesus' passion and death. The intensity of emotional power in these passages begins to increase. The Lord now is in Jerusalem and is addressing the chief priests and elders of the people. He continues to contrast the kingdom of God which He is announcing to the religion that they represent. In so doing, He is trying to keep people focused on what is essentially important in the living of a life of faith and not get caught up in trivial peripheries.

And so now in this context He proposes this parable. *"The kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son."* The context of a wedding feast is familiar ground for us. The New Testament often uses the image of a wedding feast to talk about the friendship between God and the human race. Think of the wedding feast at Cana, where Jesus is a guest. We must always see in the person of Jesus the ultimate expression of the wedding of heaven and earth, of divinity and humanity. He is the master image of this reality. And we, His followers, are invited to join in the joy and celebration of this union.

The King in today's parable is God the Father, who is giving a banquet for God the Son, whose bride is the Church. So, in a very real sense, we are more than mere guests, we, as Church, are the bride at the wedding. We are being espoused to Christ who is the bridegroom. The joyful intimacy of the Father and Son is now offered to us to be shared.

From Isaiah we hear a beautiful parallel to the gospel: *"On this mountain the LORD of hosts will provide for all peoples a feast of rich food and choice wines, juicy, rich food and pure, choice wines."* **YHWH** is spreading out His banquet before us to feed his people. But who would have guessed how extravagantly this promise would be fulfilled?

St. Thomas Aquinas said that God is the supreme good; to be good is to give one's self away. Thomas goes on to say that though it was unexpected it makes eminent sense that God ultimately gave Himself away as real food and real drink at the Last Supper.

And so, these images represent the positive, good news side of this parable. As the parable goes on, there is a darker edge to it all. Remember, it is the King who is doing the inviting to a wedding banquet for his son. In terms of the parable it is a state occasion of great moment. This would be similar to being invited by the Queen of England to the wedding of her grandson, or perhaps the president inviting us to the wedding of one of his daughters. These are quite different invitations compared to being invited to the wedding of a friend from college. These are state occasions of great import and significance.

In Jesus' time, the wedding banquet was a way of affirming the king's power and the legitimacy of his succession. You see, when a king said come to the wedding of my son, that is his way of saying come and show your loyalty to me because this is my successor. By coming to the wedding you were saying, yes, I am on the king's side, on the side of his family and successor. By not coming, you were committing an act of insurrection. So this helps to explain the darker side of the parable for us. We can understand better the king's very severe reaction when people do not come to the banquet. As we heard:

Some ignored the invitation and went away, one to his farm, another to his business. The rest laid hold of his servants, mistreated them, and killed them.

You would have to admit these are some pretty strange reactions to such a wonderful invitation to a most special occasion. What is going on here?

Every one of us, here today, has been invited to the best wedding we could ever imagine. And so much more than merely invited as a guest, we have been asked to be the bride to this incomparable groom. God the Father has sent His Son in order to share His divine life with us. That is the proposal of Christianity.

And just to stand back for a moment: there has been no other religion or philosophy on the planet that has ever proposed a more extraordinary opportunity to the human race.

God became human that humans might become God. That is how the Church fathers put it. It simply means that God became human in order that we might become sharers in the divine life. That's the wedding banquet. To miss that, is to miss everything. To miss that is to be insulting to the king. To miss that is to perform an act of insurrection. God continues to offer this invitation—how are you responding?

And so this is why the king responds in such an egregious way. We hear that he sends his troops and he attacks these people and burns down their city.

What is being communicated to us is a very simple point: this matters enormously. In fact, nothing matters more. We too often, like characters in the parable, respond with: I've got my farm. I've got my business. I've got other things of greater importance. But, nothing matters more than how you respond—whether you respond to this invitation.

We are reminded by the Psalmist; our lives are over like a sigh. Seventy is the sum of our years, or eighty if we are strong. Yes, there is much in our lives that occupies us. But NOTHING is more important than this invitation. All that finally matters is how and whether you respond to this invitation. This is why we see such intensity in the king's reaction. It is meant as a wake-up call to us all.

All of us are being named in this parable. We've all heard the invitation of God to enter into intimacy with Him; to make Him the center of our lives; to be married to Him in Christ. And we find the most pathetic excuses not to respond.

As you have heard me say before, the tragedy of secularism is the ideology that says that I can be satisfied by the goods of this world alone: pleasure, money, power, success, and honor—all the usual suspects. Yet, they are not able to completely satisfy the human heart.

This parable is meant to highlight what strange priorities we tend to have; and pressing the point further that we go so far as to kill the messengers sent to us from the king. Sometimes we can actually become aggressive toward those who bear the good news of our invitation. Think of the very aggressive edge of secularism tending toward atheism today. That is a kind of attack on those who are proposing to us the best possible opportunity ever.

So what does the king do as the parable comes to its close? He sends his servants out and says: since those who were invited didn't come, go and invite everybody. They go out to the highways and byways and he throws open the doors of the banquet letting everyone come in.

God's invitation is so generous and so grand; He goes out to those who don't feel invited; to those who are not privileged. He goes out to the blind, the crippled, the sinners, and the marginalized. And so we hear that the servants went out to into the streets and gathered everyone they could find, bad and good alike. And the hall was filled with guests. This is a vivid picture of evangelization and outreach that bears the divine invitation to all, good and bad. Some received this invitation in a privileged way, but did not respond. And so the invitation goes out to low and high, to good and bad, insiders and outsiders. That's the great stance of the Church to invite the world into the banquet.

Regarding the man who entered without a wedding garment, this garment represents the white, pure baptismal garment. It signifies complete repentance and total conversion; a total change of heart and mind. Without these, we cannot enter the banquet of the Lord.

We have all heard this message—we know it. We have heard the invitation. It's the best thing on offer in the whole universe. Stop making excuses, stop saying you have something better to do. Respond wholeheartedly today to this great invitation to salvation.

YHWH=The Name of God in Hebrew

- Fr. David M. Chiantella