

28th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR A 2020

Isaiah 25:6-10 Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20 Matthew 22:1-14

Reflection

Fr Tao Pham

Dear sisters and brothers, the passage in the First Reading (Is 25:6-10) this weekend is one of the most universalist and 'ecumenical' passages in the Old Testament. Here Isaiah, the greatest of the messianic prophets, uses the image of a banquet to describe the blessings God will bestow, not only on Israel, but also on all nations. He talks, not about a plain meal, but about 'a banquet of rich food and fine wines'. Thus he underlines the generosity of God. He goes on to paint a picture of a world transformed, a world in which sorrow, suffering, and death will be no more.

A favourite image of the messianic age used in the Old Testament above was that of a wedding banquet. Jesus uses this image in his parable about the banquet that is ready for the guests. The messianic age has arrived, and the king (God) is giving a wedding banquet for his son (Jesus). He sends out his servants (the prophets) to tell the invited guests (the Israelites) that the banquet is ready (the messianic age has arrived). When the invited guests reject the invitation, and even kill some of the servants, the king sends out his army to destroy these people. This recalls the destruction of Jerusalem that occurred in the year 70, and so is still fresh in the minds of Matthew's audience. Jesus uses the image of a banquet in this parable to show that now all people are invited to the kingdom of God. The king again sends out his servants, who now invite everyone they meet – sinners and outcasts as well as good people. These people are the new Israel, and they fill the banquet hall. But individuals can accept or ignore or refuse that invitation. To refuse that invitation is to cut ourselves off from our supernatural life source. God doesn't force salvation on us. The invitation is given, but accepting the call is up to us. Many are called.

Matthew adds another parable to the story of the banquet and makes one parable out of two. When the king comes into the banquet, he finds a man not properly dressed for the celebration, and he has him bound and thrown out. The members of the early Church realize that some who belong to their number are not living as true disciples of Jesus. They have not acted properly for their privilege of sharing in the banquet of the kingdom. Just because they have accepted the invitation to the banquet does not automatically give them a right to ignore the commands of Jesus concerning those who live in the kingdom. The passage ends with a statement that implies many are invited to share in the kingdom, but those who accepted are few.

Matthew clearly means his readers to understand that he is describing God's dealings with the Jews, their disobedience to him, and the new covenant, which will include the Gentiles. The new covenant comes about through Jesus through him all God's children are invited to the banquet feast of the kingdom.

What is the banquet? The banquet stands for the fullness of life to which God is calling us. It is a call to intimacy with God, and to a deeper and more authentic personal life. But it is also a call to community with others. The invitation challenges us to abandon our isolationism, our exclusivism, our self-sufficiency, and to be willing to share with others, to associate with others, and to collaborate with others. Our banquets tend to be very – for a privileged few. God's banquet is for all, Jews and Gentiles, outcasts and sinners: 'Go to the crossroads and invite everyone you can find to the wedding.' And, of course, in the final analysis, it is a call to eternal life in the hereafter. It is very easy for us to be so busy with the things of time that we forget the things of eternity.

There are different ways of responding the invitation:

An invitation demands a response. Let us suppose that you are giving a party. When you have fixed date, you draw up a list of the people you wish to invite. Then you send out the invitations with an *RSVP* emblazoned on them, and wait for the responses to come back. Basically you can expect three kinds of responses.

Some accept you invitation. Every acceptance makes you feel happy. Of course there can be degrees of acceptance. Some accept half-heartedly; they are coming only because they feel in some way obliged to come. But others accept with enthusiasm; they feel honoured and grateful for having been invited.

Others refuse your invitation. Every refusal disappoints you, perhaps even hurts you. There can also be degrees of refusal. In some cases it may that people would like to come but can't because they have a prior engagement on the date in question. But in other cases people are just not interested; it's not that they *can't* come, but that they *won't* come.

There is a third way of responding to the invitation – by not responding at all. Yes, that too is a response. You wait and wait for a reply but none comes. This is worst kind of response of all. It's worse than a refusal. When people refuse the invitation, you know where you stand with them. But here you don't. You are left wondering what's going on. Have you inadvertently done something to offend the invited ones? You don't know, and probably never will know. You you were to contact them, they would probably say, 'Oh, I meant to reply, but...' I meant to! What an empty feeling that leaves you with.

God doesn't compel us. God invites us. A command can't be so easily ignored, but an invitation can. Advertisers can't compel us to buy a certain product, but they resort to all kinds of gimmicks to try to persuade and cajole us into buying it. God doesn't act like that. God has too much respect for our freedom.

Often we don't know what we really want, or even what is good for us. What we are seeking, and what deep down we really value and desire, are not always the same thing. Perhaps we are so busy, our lives are so full, that even God has difficulty in breaking through to us.

What is God calling us to? God is calling us to a deeper and more authentic life here on earth. He is calling us into intimacy with himself. He is calling us into community with others. And at death he will call us into eternal life. The greatest danger facing us is not that we might abandon God and turn to evil, but rather that we might just ignore his invitation. To ignore God's invitation altogether is the worst form of refusal. It implies indifference. Indifferent people are the hardest to convert. When we refuse God's invitation, it is not God who suffers. It is we who suffer. We miss out on the joy of the wedding feast.

The story tells us that the king invites the good as well as the bad - this means that in the reign of God, we will find those who are good and those who are bad. What grabs our attention in this Gospel reading is the person at the end without a garment. The one who does not wear a wedding garment is the one who comes to the banquet with no intention of changing his or her life. The "party pooper" is thrown out. That person accepted the invitation but was not properly dressed. That detail expresses an important caution for us. Receiving the invitation to life and communion with Christ is one thing. Staying in union with Him is something else. Accepting the invitation to the kingdom, to share God's life through Jesus Christ, means more than showing up in church and letting supernatural things happen to us. We have to do our part. Enjoying the banquet means we add something to the party. We pray together, believe together, and strive to live as good a life as possible, not for ourselves alone, but for the king and all the other people sharing in the banquet.

In Jesus, the very life of God is offered to everyone but only those who actually change their way of living to follow the Gospel will experience the transforming power of God. We need to give up our old clothes and habits and put on the new clothes of Christian discipleship. We are all called but we have to accept that call. Our entry to the banquet is not just a baptismal call to which we or our parents responded years ago; we must wear the garments of our Baptism now. It's the baptismal life that counts not just the baptismal certificate. So, the questions for all of us are: "Are you properly dressed for church? What kind of life do you bring to this Eucharistic banquet? What is

the condition of your baptismal garment? Are your baptismal promises long forgotten and discarded? Is your Baptism a memory or an active commitment shaping your life and your priorities right now?" If your baptismal promises are still shaping your life, if you accept the invitation to discipleship and come here clothed as one truly trying to live up to your call in Baptism, then at this sacred banquet of the Mass you will receive God's promise that eternal life is yours. You will receive His guarantee that He will be your strength to help you to the banquet that will never end.

Dear sisters and brothers, the aim of the parable is not to consider how we will be punished if we don't heed God's invitation. Rather, it is to help us to see what we will miss if we do not heed God's invitation. Those who refused to come miss out on the joy of the wedding feast. Only God knows what is truly best for us. Amen.

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