

Twenty Eighth Sunday of the Year October 15, 2017

Isaiah 25:6-10 Philipians 4:12-14.19-20 Matthew 22:1-14

From the earliest of times man has desired to seek God and build personal relationship with him. Our God presents himself as a personal God and takes deep interest in the wellbeing of each person. He personally desires that each one comes to him with love and experiences his presence, goodness, truth and beauty. He comes to us as a God who is concerned, caring and loving and takes interest in the growth of each person. He is the source of everything and lacks nothing. He is full of mercy, kindness and love, but at the same time merciful and just. The readings of today remind us that it is only in the experience of God that we as human persons find the full meaning and fulfillment of our life. In the Old Testament the prophets warn God's people time and time again not to substitute the worship and trust in true God, for fabricated idols, food, useless military alliances, or pleasures. All things find their meaning and measure in reference to God. In the first reading prophet Isaiah speaks of the abundant providence of the Lord of hosts for all peoples. The prophet describes the transformation God's kingdom will bring. There will be peace and plenty. God will provide them a feast, take away the veil that keeps us from seeing, put an end to suffering and destroy death. In the second reading Paul experiences the strength and support of God who has enabled him to persevere in the midst of many varied and difficult circumstances. He explains that he depended on God to strengthen him in all circumstances of life. He is confident that the church of Philippi will enjoy God's glorious riches because of their relationship with Christ. In the Gospel the parable of the wedding banquet allegorically describes how, even though the marginalized were invited into the grand feast, it takes more than showing up to participate in the banquet. This parable implies a certain purification and elevation of our desires to be able to recognize and to choose God's invitation among the many other clamoring interests of life. God opens his invitation to whosoever is to be found. All are accepted, on condition that he wears proper wedding garment that makes the person worthy of the kingdom.

Prophet Isaiah carrying out his prophetic mission in Jerusalem spoke strongly against the disloyalty and worldliness of the Chosen People of his day. He told them many things and expectations concerning the messianic age that was to come. In today's reading he describes under the image of the great banquet, the blessings, the contentment and the happiness that the messianic kingdom will

bring. He tells them that on Mount Zion God will care for all the nations of the world. God gives in plenty and this will replace the meager resources of the proud who presumed to rule the world. The prophet gives special attention to the pure choice wines available at the banquet. These fine wines contrast with the failed vineyard of the Lord, where people were preoccupied with their own worldly interests. But Isaiah looks forward to a brighter future when people at last value their service to God. The Prophet consoles the people saying that the Lord's mountain will also be a place of healing for humanity. The web woven all over the nations indicate the human pride that obscures God's view of something ideal for humanity. Both Jews and Gentiles will together recognize the true God. The power of God will be manifested in Jerusalem. With all human failings removed, there will be no more tears caused by the suffering and death of warfare.

The generous unsolicited aid which the Christian converts of Philippi provided to St Paul who was in prison in Rome should be an example and encouragement to the Christians in the spread of the Gospel. Philippians was the only community from whom Paul accepted a financial gift and he thanks them for the same. He assures them that God will reward them for the charitable aid given him. The Apostle says that he has trained himself to accept the ups and downs of life. The secret of his success is that he had placed his complete trust in Christ and he firmly believed and convinced that Christ will not abandon him in his trials. He is sure that Christ will strengthen him in all his difficulties. Paul is confident that God will help his friends in Philippi in all their needs. No doubt Paul is thinking of their spiritual situation. He mentions the glorious riches that God the Father provides for them in Christ Jesus. He tells them that they must have complete confidence in God because their lives are in his capable hands. If he permits temporal spiritual trials into their lives, he has a purpose for them. We may not see the purpose but he does see them and cares for each with love.

In the Gospel we have another parable about the rejection of Jesus by the leaders of his own people. This parable like the other parables was addressed to the "chief priests and elders of the people", that is, the religious and civic leaders. The parable divides itself clearly into three distinct parts: first the two invitations sent out to the intended guests; second, a general call to all kinds of outcasts; and third some criteria set for taking part in the feast. This is a parable about the Kingdom of God and about the people who will eventually belong to it. Jesus here gives the picture of a marriage feast arranged for the king's son. In the parable,

the king sends out his servants, referring to the long line of prophets sent to the people of Israel inviting them to love and service of God. But they would not come, says Jesus. The King sends out another batch of servants to tell those who have been invited that he has his banquet all prepared... Everything is ready. They have to come to the wedding. When this special call is given there is always a sense of urgency. They are called upon to respond immediately. The person invited is expected to be always on the watch. What takes place is totally different. We are told that those invited were simply not interested. They reacted in two ways. Either they were too involved in their own worldly interests to be bothered or they seized the king's messengers, maltreated them and killed them. We are reminded of the parable we heard last Sunday about the absentee landlord sending messengers to collect the produce and the reception they got. They did not treat the servants well and they finally killed the son.

This parable of the wedding banquet like the parable of the vineyard and the wicked tenants has an allegorical emphasis. This parable stresses on the story of the salvation history from the initial sending of the prophets to Israel through the renewed invitation of the followers of Jesus. It concludes with the Last Judgment when the good and bad from among the community are sorted out. In this parable first the invitation is sent out to come to the banquet feast and secondly it describes the ejection of the man who had come without the proper wedding garment. The invitation and the rejection refer to Israel's negative response to God's prophets. The response of the king to the killing of his messengers is harsh and includes the burning of their city. For Matthew this is the reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 A.D. and provides an explanation to his own community to the terrible devastation. With the refusal of those originally invited the final invitation is sent characterized by its broad scope, to invite to the feast whomsoever they will find. The servants are now sent out, not to the houses of the wealthy and respectable, but to the crossroads, to ordinary people. This reflects the invitation Jesus gave to the marginalized people such as the tax collectors, sinners and the prostitutes. No exceptions are made. All are invited, good and bad alike, until the wedding hall is filled. It also accounts for the presence of the gentiles within Matthew's Jewish Christian Community.

A strange and even shocking aspect of the parable emerges after the diverse guests have been summoned from the highways and byways. The king sees a man not properly dressed with the wedding garment and questions him as to why

he was not wearing the garment. But he was silent. Then the king has him bound up and cast outside into the darkness. Many are puzzled with such attitude of the master and we have the hint for this rejection from the last verse, namely, many are called and only a few are chosen. The fact that the person is invited into the wedding banquet is not a guarantee that he or she will be able to stay there. The wedding garment in the parable symbolizes that the wedding guest, whatever his past may have been, has put on Christ and is converted to him. Such a person, through Baptism, the sacrament by which one is given access to the wedding banquet of the Lord, has grown to be clothed in the spirit and teachings of Jesus. This is shown by the gradual transformation of his life through the influence of Jesus he experiences in the Christian community. Secondly, we might reflect today on just how clean our wedding garment really is. It tells us to consider as to what extent we have really offered ourselves in love and service to Jesus and to his people. It tells us of the extent to which we give clear witness of our values and beliefs both inside and outside the community. It invites us to manifest the values of Christ we are called upon to live. Thirdly, we must never forget that, while as Church members we are expected to contribute actively to its life and witnessing, the forgiveness of God and of the community is always available whenever we betray its ideals. The Gospel tells us that mere physical presence is not sufficient. Without the proper conversion one will be rejected.

The Gospel reminds us that there is a necessary correspondence on our part in good deeds if we are to be found worthy of God's presence. Conversion, if it is real, is not only a mental, notional turning towards God, but is also, necessarily, the source of action in our lives. Only the truth that touches our lives bears the proper fruits of conversion, good deeds. These are not isolated good deeds, as if we could segment and confine our experience of God to certain areas of our lives. God can only be loved with whole heart and whole mind, and it is only this type of conversion that enables us to live, and to want to live, the demands of the Gospel. As in the case of the guest found to be unworthy, it is our actions that reveal the degree of real conversion of our lives to God. The responsorial Psalm sings of the experience of the Lord's protection as a shepherd who foresees the needs of the psalmist even when he has 'to walk in the dark valley'. The psalmist, on his way to 'the house of the Lord' experiences the light and sustenance of the Lord's presence.

Reviewing the reading from the Gospel of Matthew, we perceive that there is a

deep spiritual meaning involved. We are no longer at a Great Feast but at a Royal Wedding Feast. It is a Wedding Banquet that the Father gives for His Son. The Son is Jesus. The Bride is the invisible Kingdom of God on earth, the Mystical Body of Christ that is made visible through the Holy Catholic Church. The Church had its beginning in Jerusalem on Pentecost Day when the Apostles received the Holy Spirit. All of this is confirmed through the Book of Revelation. "And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more...'" The invitations were sent out to all, the good and the bad. These generous invitations echo the abounding love and mercy of God that reaches out towards all, forgiving the sins of those who will sincerely repent of their evil ways in order to embrace a life of righteousness. What is clear from this reading is that those who do not persevere, their punishment will be instant and severe. While all are called, not all answer their calling by the grace of God, some rejecting the invitation, some not accepting it fully. Not being adorned with a white robe that identifies them as children of God, those who neglect their salvation shall be thrown out in outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Today's readings tell us that God has wonderful things in store for us. Everyone, no matter what kind of past they have had, receives the same invitation to sit down at God's table. God invites all and he has no partiality. However, having initially answered the invitation, we cannot take things for granted. There is no room for complacency in the following of Christ. One was expected to come properly dressed and not in dirty and untidy clothes. This would show a total lack of respect for one's fellow-guests. It is not God but we ourselves who are the losers. What is clear from this reading is that those who do not persevere, their punishment will be instant and severe. While all are called, not all answer their calling by the grace of God, some rejecting the invitation, some not accepting it fully. By not being dressed with a white robe that identifies them as children of God, those who neglect their salvation shall be thrown out in outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. The parable tells us that God gives us sufficient grace. Man is called upon to cooperate with this gift of grace. Our failure to cooperate with this grace and our inability to respond to God will lead to the exclusion from the kingdom of God. So let us pray that we may keep

our wedding garments pure and spotless, that we become disciples who really hear and do the teaching of Jesus. Let us pray for a deeper faith and love and a better spirit of service and sense of responsibility to our community.

A hermit was meditating by a river when a young man interrupted him. "Master, I wish to become your disciple," said the man. "Why?" replied the hermit. The young man thought for a moment and said, "Because I want to find God." The master jumped up, grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, dragged him into the river, and plunged his head under water. After holding him there for a minute, with him kicking and struggling to free himself, the master finally pulled him up out of the river. The young man coughed up water and gasped to get his breath. When he eventually quieted down, the master spoke. "Tell me, what you wanted most of all when you were under water." "Air!" answered the man. "Very well," said the master. "Go home and come back to me when you want God as much as you just wanted air. Then I will teach you to find God."

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