

28th Sunday of Ordinary Time – October 11, 2020

Three Sundays in a row, we've had parables concerning vineyards. This Sunday, a parable concerning a banquet. There's a logical progression, for vineyards are for banquets – if you were in any doubt, witness Isaiah's reference of "choice wines" in our first reading. It's not just a banquet, mind you, but a wedding banquet – and this conjunction of wine and weddings cannot but make us think of Christ's



first miracle at the Wedding of Cana. What is this business with Christ and weddings? It's no surprise: every time He describes heaven for us, it is depicted as a wedding banquet! But this is also not simply a wedding banquet in our parable, is it? It is a wedding banquet thrown by the king. This must surely allay any doubts at all that Christ is speaking to us of the heavenly nuptials: the wedding of the Lamb.

Before we get to that, though, let us focus our minds on what it means for the king to host a banquet. We live in a supposedly democratic age, far removed from the courts of royals. But even we can appreciate what an honor it is for the monarch to host a banquet. Much ink was shed over President Trump's State Banquet with the Queen at Buckingham Palace. Who might expect such an honor? Surely, such an expectation belongs only to heads of state and other dignities. These are the first invitees to the king's banquet: those to the manor born – counts and dukes and earls, the Lords of the Realm: aristocracy. Since these have easy access to the king and come and go at the royal palace as of expectation, for them it is "easy come, easy go" and they decline the royal wedding's invitation or treat it with indifference – to undertake menial or everyday occupations.

Indeed, they even mistreat and put to death the peskily insistent messengers of the king, which makes us realize Christ speaks once more, as He did last week with the wicked tenants of the vineyard, of the Chosen (or Elect) People of Israel. Here, it dawns on us that we are caught in the dynamics of a parable – that clever literary device which catches us out in our presumptions. Three weeks running, we have fallen into their traps and had our presumption exposed: first, by identifying with the early workers and begrudging the workers of the 11th hour their wage, second, by identifying with the son who declined the father's instruction but then made good on it, and thirdly, by drawing the conclusion the wicked tenants are the Jews – when it is we who are the stewards now in the Church of salvation (and what fruits have we produced?), it is we who made empty promises at baptism (to renounce sin and become saints) without bothering to do the work, and it is we who are the johnny come lately to salvation (yet we begrudge latecomers their equal status) and so short-change ourselves of the mercy of God we have received so lavishly.

This week, our sympathy is with the poor peasant recruited to the king's banquet by the king's messengers when he instructs them to fill the feast with anyone they happen along on the

highways and byways of the kingdom. We sympathize with him because it seems to us harsh, the condemnation he received, simply because he was inadequately attired for a wedding. This is precisely where the trap works.

In seeking the meaning of this curious turn, we are offered only this mysterious clue: “*Many are called. Few are chosen.*” These are also the closing words of this parable. Let’s consider more deeply the parable. Initially, the banquet was for those the king invited. These are the called, surely. Those invited to royal weddings are the aristocracy – those privileged by birth. Remember, one becomes a Jew by birth; but one becomes a Christian only by adoption (at Baptism). According to the parable, those with the birth-right refused it. These could hardly complain, then, if they were punished by our hapless fellow – since it was by their own choice. In our parable, the king puts it expressly: “those invited were not worthy”. This raises for us the interesting qualifier: that one’s worth, in the end, will be determined less in accordance with one’s station in life as it will in accordance with one’s life’s response. Not in the calling, then, but in the choosing. Others, then, are admitted to the banquet in their place: the uninvited. But for these, surely such an honor must have appeared truly an unexpected privilege: to be received in the royal banqueting hall. How could he take it for granted? It would be the greatest day of his life! By this do they indicate their worthiness. Not that they were born to it, as of right. But precisely because they – least of all – might have expected to be invited to a royal banquet, they should be the happiest of all to be there. Unlike those considered worthy by birth, who ended up accounting it for little, and blowing it off altogether, those who might never have hoped for so great an honor should end up valuing it greater than anything in their lives. They make themselves worthy of it by the meaning and reverence they attach to the event. How could our hapless fellow wander in to such a thing willy-nilly or unworthily prepared?

Who is this man singled out by our parable? This man is me. The trap of the last three Sundays’ parables was presumption; its cure is called compunction. This is the attitude of the one for whom salvation is the greatest treasure in his life – precisely because it is unexpected and which we have not merited as of right. Such a one responds with alacrity and gratitude. Fundamentally, compunction (gratitude for undeserved salvation) is an interior attitude – but let us not pretend it should not be reflected in one’s exterior behavior and comportment.

When we, then, were invited to so great a feast as heaven, during the Rite of Baptism, we were presented with a white garment, put on at the priest’s instruction to “put on Jesus Christ!” The garment itself is only symbolic, of course – we recall that symbolism at every mass, when the priest puts on that white garment – the alb – intended to represent our baptismal dignity. Whereas the garment is symbolic, the dignity it represents is very real: we have agreed to put on over ourselves the Person of Jesus Christ. In the Preface to the Eucharistic Prayer at this Mass you will hear the plea: “that you might love in us what you loved in your Son.” St. Paul puts it best when he writes that when the Father looks down, He sees no longer me but rather Christ, living in me. Christian theology calls the Baptized “the elect”, and elect is another way of saying “the chosen”. Many are called, few chosen. We who have chosen “to put on Christ” and are the elect of God ought to be recognized by Him in the nuptial garment we received at baptism. Not for nothing does this garment resemble a wedding dress. The banquet to which we are headed is a nuptial feast, a wedding banquet for the king’s son. Notice how, nowhere in the parable, do we hear of the son’s bride. Who is the lucky lady who has found her prince? Well, surely it is the one wearing

the long white dress? That should be the clearest indication. It is you and I, representing you here at this altar. We are the Bride of Christ. We are the Church which God came to espouse in Jesus Christ. This makes ours a privilege greater by far than yet realized. Not only are we guests of this banquet: we are the most honored guest: dear friends, we are the bride herself. How much more, then, ought we to be attentively attired. Imagine if the bride, herself, should present at her nuptials with a torn and soiled gown!

Holy Mass is the earthly prefigurement of the celestial banquet in heaven. Should we not present ourselves here with dignity that the occasion requires? If we are the spouse of Christ and this is our own wedding banquet, should we not, then, dress appropriately, behave appropriately. Outward appearances are not everything, of course, but they are indicative of our interior disposition. Also, by making the effort with exteriors we incline ourselves to having the correct interior dispositions when approaching the banquet table of the altar. Is our attire the way we would dress when attending the wedding even of a colleague or friend? How much more, then, when attending our own wedding feast! How much more when we dare to present ourselves arrayed as the spotless bride of Christ! I do not mean only that we should dress as we would for so great an occasion: our finer clothes, properly cleaned and ironed, shoes polished. If only it were that easy! We must also do that. But the kinds of adornment and finery befitting the Bride of Christ are the garments of holiness and the jewels of righteousness. This cleanliness and polishing is interior, and is done, not in the laundry, but in the confessional, not through detergent and polish but by the grace of the sacraments and growth in virtue.

When the Master of the Banquet comes to greet His guests, let Him find us arrayed – inwardly and outwardly – as a spotless Bride ready to meet so magnificent a groom as Christ. Let the Father find each of us still spotlessly arrayed in that white garment, gift of our baptism, unsoiled and unstained by worldliness and sin.