

28<sup>th</sup> Sun (A)

15<sup>th</sup> October 2023

'Places at the Banquet'

Is 25:6–10, “a banquet of fine wines”      Ps 22: “you have prepared a banquet for me”  
Phil 4: “ready for anything, full stomach or empty”

Mt 22:1–14, inviting all to the Son’s wedding banquet.

I know *just* how that king must have felt! It happened to me on my ordination day back in Sept 1999. The ordination Mass was over, and during the afternoon buffet which followed I was trying to chat to the 500+ people who’d come for it, struggling to have a word with each of them. But gradually I began to find that some of the guests due to be joining us for the sit-down evening dinner were actually saying goodbye to me, and couldn’t make the evening after all. Some had babies to attend to, some just wanted to get home earlier, some had planned other things, some were off on holiday. So there I was, fresh from the ceremony of ordination, and instead of being caught up in the spiritual wonder of it all, I was chasing round with a tatty envelope left from someone’s card, scribbling down with a pen that would hardly write 2 columns of names, one of those who were pulling out, and one of those whom I was inviting to fill their places ... and hoping that I didn’t accidentally invite more new guests than I had spare places! There were plenty of takers: friends who were really touched that I was inviting them, very

eager to join me for the celebratory dinner. The contrast with those who had declined was striking. I pretty much filled the 15 spare seats, and we had a wonderful evening.

Even if it didn’t feel very spiritual, it was a task that is straight out of today’s Gospel: God inviting all and sundry into His kingdom, and to the banquet that is an image of heaven. Even in the Old Testament, the Lord is seen as preparing a feast of “food rich and juicy, of fine strained wines” *for all peoples*. This is the ‘Messianic banquet,’ the divine celebration that would accompany the ‘marriage’ (the perpetual union) of the Son of God to the human race. God threw open the invitation to the whole world. No longer was the Lord just “the God of Israel,” *now He was inviting all peoples*, “good and bad alike” — the Gospel had to be preached to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. This is our Christian faith: that the invitation from God to join Him in His heavenly kingdom is *for all peoples*, not just for a few keen pious followers, but for every single person on this planet, if only we would make it known. “*God’s will is that everyone should be saved and reach full knowledge of the truth*” (1Tim 2:4),

says St Paul. We're the ones who've got to be out there at the crossroads making known the news that there are *always* spare places in His kingdom.

But we do not — we cannot — coerce! God's invitation is always a gentle request, never a forcing. He has given us free will, a real choice, a freedom of our own. At my dinner some made excuses while others were eager to come along, but those who wouldn't come really missed out. In the same way, those who say 'No thanks' to God's invitation are the ones sadly missing out, and making what is in truth the wrong choice. Those who turn down the opportunity to share God's life are the ones missing out on the real party, the ones who think it's better to busy themselves with other things than to celebrate the fact that the Son of God has 'married' the human race, entered into a perpetual covenant with us, and will never leave us.

In this world, we know we have to *wait* for a complete and full celebration of this banquet of God's life. Each and every week there are sadnesses, near to home or further afield, and we experience unexpected disasters and

tragic loss of life. (We see the truly awful effects of war, in these past months in the Ukraine, and now also on the Israel–Palestine border.) Thus we recognise the *frailty* of life, and I can't help thinking, "Am I ready for heaven? Am I prepared for my death?" If heaven is like a banquet, how used am I to the food of heaven? Will I even recognize what is on the menu? Have I grown up enough spiritually to be ready to digest the "*food rich and juicy and fine strained wines*" which the Lord will serve up? If I am to spend eternity in the company of the Lord, have I thought how best to get to know Him while on earth? Have I sat with Him enough and got to know Him yet? Where better than here at the *altar*, where He *feeds* me with the finest nourishment that there is, i.e. with His Body and Blood? We hear at every single Mass, "Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb." God doesn't force us to be here, but when we reflect on it, we'd be silly not to be! It's a *foretaste of heaven*. Here at Mass, Jesus feeds us Himself; He feeds us *with* Himself; we rejoice in His company; we are overawed that He is our Host. Here,

served by the Lord Jesus, we leave our pride behind and we recognise that this — Holy Mass — is the closest thing to heaven, on earth. It *is* the grace of the Messianic banquet already set before us.

There's an outstanding feature of the parable today that we have not so far addressed. It's the awkward final bit, where the King throws out a few of the guests — even after all that effort to fill the wedding hall — for not wearing a 'wedding garment.' Now why is that? How is that not unjust? They've been invited in off the streets, haven't they; how can they possibly have had a wedding garment with them? The key to understanding this point is that the *host* of the wedding party would have himself *provided* the wedding garments. So, the King's point is: how is that you have accepted my generous hospitality, come in to my banquet, but in fact want to cast off my gift to you, showing that you wish to have nothing to do with me? A lived example of this, for me, was when we were concelebrating the WYD Mass in Lisbon back in August. We were each given a 'wedding garment,' a chasuble for

the Mass, a gift to keep. It showed the unanimity of the celebration — the unity-in-diversity which is the hall mark of the Catholic Church. All it required to get our WYD chasubles was a brief *excursus* on our 6am walk from our groups' locations across the vast venue to the seats in front of the sanctuary from where we would concelebrate. And yet, some priests chose not to accept that chasuble, and thereby not to witness to the unity of the Church's celebration. It was a shame. (I'm sure they had their reasons, but the sign value was poor.)

The invitation of the Lord to join Him in happiness and life is made generously, and with our determined help the net is cast wide. But the Lord also makes His demands: not unreasonable demands, but simply asking His people to be clothed in Him, by Him; asking us to receive, treasure, honour His lavish gifts. Yes, He calls in to His Kingdom the bad and the good alike, but with a view to bringing all alike to faith and love. To be called into His company (His Church) means to want to have Him as our divine Host, and accept that we each have to change; we can't just sit

there and avoid the consequences of our Baptismal garment. All are invited; everyone is welcome, but not to be complacent, instead to learn to love, respect and adore the Host.

There is an *inbuilt tension* in this, I know: to invite all and sundry to become involved in some way in the Church, and yet to make demands of them too. The Lord doesn't shy away from this, does He? This is why Jesus Himself tells the parable as He does; and *nothing* He does or says is wasted. He spells out that the invitation is an open one, but that to accept it also requires some commitment, some adherence. It's the tension that will always be at the heart of the Church's evangelization; it's at the heart of the Synod concerns in Rome this month as well. We want to have open doors, welcoming in all to encounter Christ — the Pope repeated this time & again in Lisbon this summer ("*todos, todos,*" he repeated) — and yet we cannot hide from those invited in that the Lord has divine laws, a kingly rule that can be ignored. All are invited in; and yet all are invited in to be clothed in Christ,

and restored to His likeness. It's a bit like *Nightfever*: anyone and everyone is invited in off the streets, regardless; no-one is forced, and those who choose to come in to the church are offered to approach the altar, ablaze with the light of the Risen Lord in His Most Holy Eucharistic presence. This is not meant to leave them untouched or unchanged ... it is a chance for the Lord to speak to their heart, especially if they are sad, lonely, empty of His Spirit. And maybe some of them will choose to stay around, continue to accept the generous hospitality of the Lord, but that will also make demands of them, in due course that they can be healed of errors, sins, and mistaken thinking — not all at once, but little by little, and as a gift from His Sacred Heart. It's the very same approach as our Wednesday *Sycamore* Programme of video evangelization; anyone can come — everyone is welcome, of some faith or of none — just to 'dip the toe in' as it were, and glimpse a little more of Jesus, and the setting is a free meal. Please God some will choose to stay the course, find themselves drawn ever more to Jesus's

offer, His teachings, and indeed His laws and His food of eternal life.

May we be conscientious workers at the crossroads, bringing all and sundry to have a chance to meet Christ; may we also be devoted wearers of the wedding garment, living up to the life we were given when we were baptized, so as to teach others the deep joy and lifelong peace that comes with being clothed in Christ in readiness for the Kingdom.

*You have prepared a banquet for me*

*In the sight of me foes;*

*My head you have anointed with oil,*

*My cup is overflowing ...* (Ps 22: 5)