

Commentary to the 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A –

Invited to dance with God

Introduction



The kingdom of God is the central theme of Jesus' preaching. He begins his public life by announcing: "The kingdom of God is at hand" (Mk 1:15). Then, using many parables, he gradually reveals "the mysteries" (Mt 13). That one of the last hour workers (Mt 20:1-16) is certainly the most puzzling. Jesus told it to emphasize both the gratuitousness of the call and the commitment required of one who enters the kingdom of God. It cannot be denied that it is tiring to remain faithful to Christ. But if being a disciple involves considerable efforts, how could the grievances of the workers hired at six in the morning and paid like those who arrived at five in the evening not considered justified?

If you set the relationship with God in terms of a not equally remunerated work, if the award received in heaven is not proportionate to the accumulated merit, then one may think that he who sets foot in the kingdom of heaven at the last moment, who is lucky enough to “die in the grace of God” after he “had enjoyed life” away from him, is blessed.

This is the mentality that creates the careless (one who is indifferent to the calls to faith), the latecomer (who compromises in doing good as late as possible), the unruly (who keeps the commandments under stress and fear of hell), the shabby (the baptized person who continues to act as a semi-pagan). Only he who understands that the kingdom of God is a feast, a banquet, decidedly enters without delay, because he does not want to miss even a moment of joy that is offered to him.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

“Standing on the threshold of your house, O Lord, give more joy than to dwell in the palaces of the wicked.”

-----1st Reading | 2nd Reading | Gospel-----

First Reading: Isaiah 25:6-10a

In ancient times only important people could afford a great banquet. Kings organized them often for political reasons: inviting those with whom they wanted to form alliances or to strengthen bonds of friendship. The banquets celebrating certain recurrences or victory over enemies were particularly sumptuous (cf. 1:1-8 East; Dn 5).

In today’s reading, the prophet presents himself as the herald of a sensational announcement. Not a ruler of this world but God will give a banquet, of which he lists the menu: rich food, all kinds of tasty meats, fine and choice wines (v. 6) ... stuff to overload the imagination of the poor people of Israel, who used to eat only once a day and not always.

Even the rabbis are delighted to quibble about the courses offered in this banquet. Starting from the fact that the Bible is reminiscent of a sea monster called Leviathan, who was killed by God and given "as meat to the people who lived in the wilderness" (Ps 74:14), they concluded that the main food of the righteous will be the meat of this mythical fish. It is for this reason that in Israel, even today, at the Friday evening dinner, when the Sabbath begins, it is customary to eat fish, to remind all pious people of the heavenly banquet that awaits them.

Who will be the guests?—the eager listeners anxiously asked. All the peoples of the earth, without exception, is the answer. All of them will be called to the same table. The people who hated each other before, who committed violence, who struggled to subjugate the land and the goods, will rejoice together.

Not only will they eat. They will witness extraordinary events, unheard facts will happen. The Lord will drop the veil, he will destroy the pall cast over the people (v. 7) and everyone will be able to contemplate him, seated at the table next to them. Then he "will destroy death forever and will wipe away the tears from all cheeks and eyes ..." (v. 8).

The prophet was not so naive as to think that one day biological death would no longer exist; rather he announced the demise of what is death and defeat for man: life without meaning or ideals, the mockery of failure and pain, hunger, disease, exclusion. Anything that is "non-life" will be eliminated, "for Yahweh has spoken" (v. 8). In no other text of the Old Testament so extraordinary promises are found.

The banquet, of course, will be enlivened by music, songs, and dances. The reading concludes with the text of a hymn seemed composed to be rendered by the participants in chorus: "This is our God. We have waited for him to save us, let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. For on this mountain the hand of Yahweh rests" (vv. 9-10).

The Prophet alludes to the Messianic times but did not realize the extent of the promises that, in the name of God, he was doing. He never imagined that one day the Lord would indeed destroy death forever. Paul, enlightened by the events of Easter, instead, will understand it. He will write to the Corinthians: "When our perishable being puts on imperishable life, when our mortal being puts on immortality, the words of Scripture will be fulfilled: Death has been swallowed up by victory" (1 Cor 15:54).

The seer of the Apocalypse will understand that, at the appearance of the new heavens and the new earth, God will wipe away every tear from their eyes (Rev 21:4) ... as Isaiah had predicted.

Second Reading: Philippians 4:12-14,19-20

With today's passage, the Letter to the Philippians concludes. A few, moving lines, from which profound feelings of friendship that binds Paul to that Christian community transpire. The Apostle recalls first of all the hardships, privations, the opposition that he endured for the sake of the gospel: "I know what it is to be in want and what is to have plenty. I am trained for both: to be hungry or satisfied, to have much or little" (v. 12).

He is imprisoned in Ephesus, not for common crimes, but for having served Christ. There he received the gifts sent to him by the Philippians. Paul is an austere man and is accustomed to a hard life, persecution, and starvation. However, in front of their generous gesture, he is moved and says: thank you for doing right in sharing my trials (v. 14).

Whoever risks his life for the sake of the gospel remains a man, with all the emotions and feelings. He is hurt by the ingratitude and rejoices for the expressions of esteem and affection. Above all, he who has given up everything for the sake of the Kingdom, to form one's own family, feels deeply this need for friendship. Whoever appreciates the message of salvation that he proclaims, must in some way manifest his gratitude. At the end of the letter, Paul ensures that God loves and protects his envoys and will superabundantly reward the gestures of generosity done to them (v. 19).

Gospel: Matthew 22:1-14

At Jesus' time, the Gan Eden—Garden of Eden—was fabled among the people where the righteous would enjoy every happiness. In the light of Isaiah's well-known prophecy that we found in the first reading, it is imagined as a sumptuous banquet where "wine stored in the cluster of the six days of creation" would be served as the beverage. It is represented as a place where there would be no need to spread aromas and perfumes, because "a wind from the north and a south wind blowing between the aromatic plants of Gan Eden would spread their fragrance everywhere."

The rabbis continued with promises of even greater joy: “Can a guest—they asked—prepare a banquet for travelers, without sitting at the table with them? Can a groom prepare a banquet for the guests, without sitting next to them?” Their answer was: “In the afterlife, the Holy One, may He be blessed, will have a dance for the righteous in Gan Eden and will sit in their midst, and each will point to him saying: behold, he is our God, as we expected him, we will enjoy his salvation.”

It is against this cultural background that the parable proposed to us today is projected. We immediately notice that the perspective of the kingdom of God preached by Jesus, however, is considerably different from that of the rabbis. They announced a Gan Eden prepared for the afterlife, the banquet of the kingdom of God which Jesus speaks is laden in the here and now. It is the new condition wherein he who welcomes the gift of his Spirit, who believes in his proposal of joy, who trusts his beatitudes, enters.

In the whole parable, the atmosphere is one of joy and celebration, but there are also unexpected, two dramatic moments: in the center, there is a city in flames, and in the epilogue, a victim is thrown out into the darkness. We will try to grasp the meaning even of these two scenes, but we begin first to identify the characters.

The wedding feast is the biblical image of the encounter of love between the Lord and Israel. In the parable, the bridegroom is Jesus, he is the son, and the bride is the whole of humanity which, although presenting many unattractive aspects (hate, war, injustice, tears of the innocent ...) is madly loved by God.

The banquet is the happiness of the Messianic era. Whoever accepts the proposal of the gospel and enters into the kingdom of God experiences the most authentic and deep joy. In the Bible, the kingdom of God is not compared to a chapel where everyone prays devoutly and attentively. It is not imagined as a convent where one doesn't hear the slightest noise, where nobody disturbs the meditation and ecstasy of others, but it is a banquet, where people meet, eat and drink their fill and talk and they party.

In the first reading, the prophet promised that God would organize a banquet to celebrate the victory over death. Easter is the time of God's triumph and is also the day on which the indissoluble marriages between Christ and humanity are celebrated. From then on, they no longer sense the sadness, mistrust, despair; all deaths were won; all the graves were opened wide.

The servants who have the task of taking the call are divided into three groups. The first two are the prophets of the Old Testament, until John the Baptist. They have carried out the task of preparing Israel to welcome Jesus, the bridegroom. They have not been successful. The third group indicates the apostles and all of us; the results obtained by them are much better.

The first invitees did not come to the party; they didn't have the heart to abandon their interests, the field, and business (v. 5). They did not need a banquet; they felt satiated, believed that they already have what is needed for a life without problems. They represent the spiritual leaders of Israel, satisfied with the given religious structure that offered them security before men and before God.

Those who are not aware of their poverty, who do not hunger and thirst for a new world, will never enter the kingdom of God. They will adapt to the meanness with which they usually live. Only the poor are able to understand the gratuitousness of God's love.

The guests gathered along the streets and squares are people of the whole world. It is no coincidence that, in the original text, the good and the bad are not spoken about—as is instead shown in our translation (v. 10)—but of the bad and the good, without distinction. In fact, it gives priority to those who do not have merits. It's a subtle way of alluding to the complete gratuitousness of God's love and the fact that “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom 5:6).

The presence of good and evil in the church is a theme taken up again by Matthew. One who enters into the kingdom of God does not immediately become perfect. He brings with him all his miseries, weaknesses, moral infirmity. The people of God is made up of people who are bad and good. It is a field where they continue to grow with the wheat and tares, a net that brings together all sorts of fish.

It is an invitation to cultivate an understanding of human weakness and to keep the doors open to all of our communities. The poor, the marginalized, those who feel rejected in the church must find a place where they feel accepted, understood and valued.

Before moving on to the second part of the passage, the detail of the city on fire (v. 7) should be clarified. It was certainly introduced to Matthew in the parable told by Jesus. In fact, the verse interrupts the story and if one takes it off, the story would flow more logically. It is difficult to imagine

a banquet that begins, then, in the middle, it makes war and in the end ... the dishes are still there ready on the table and the guests were kept waiting.

The evangelist wanted to make a theological reading of the destruction of Jerusalem, which has already occurred when he wrote his Gospel. The early Christians considered this tragic event as a punishment from God for the rejection of the Messiah by Israel.

We are faced with an interpretation that strikes our sensibility. We know that God is not responsible for the disasters caused by our nonsense. It is quite an archaic way to express themselves. It is derived from the language of the Old Testament where they are often called chastisements of God which in reality are the consequences of sin. Here, for example, as Isaiah explains the disasters which Israel met: "For they have rejected the law of Yahweh Sabaoth, and scorned the word of the Holy One of Israel. Therefore the Lord, his wrath burning against his people, raises his hand against them and strikes them down" (Is 5:24-25). It would not be a fidelity to the sacred text, but foolish fundamentalism, repeating these expressions today that, in our culture, have a completely different meaning. It is, therefore, necessary to transpose and reformulate the image to make it understandable to our contemporaries.

Here's how the message could be proposed today: he who rejects the Lord's pressing invitations to take part in the banquet of the kingdom of God, condemns himself to destruction, will see his life reduced to ashes, and all that he built will not be noticed ending like fuming waste. (1 Cor 3:13).

As always though, God uses even the disasters caused by sin to bring forward a project of goodness. He lets them in the realization of his plan of salvation. The destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the rejection of the Messiah by Israel have, in fact, facilitated the entry of the Gentiles into the Church. "You did not belong to the community of Israel; the covenants of God and his promises were not for you; you had no hope and were without God in this world" (Eph 2:12). They now can rightfully sit as guests at the banquet. The conclusion is as simple as touching: "And the room was full" (v. 10). Not one is missing; all the children are gathered around the table of the Father; the party can begin.

The curtain could fall on this sweet and charming scene. Instead, here the parable continues with an episode that seems to ruin everything. The king enters the room, browses at the guests and gets angry with a victim who did not wear the proper attire. He treats him with unprecedented harshness, even unjustified, considering the venial sin (vv. 11-13). Those who joined the joyful feast cannot but be stunned. How do you explain that?

It soon becomes evident that this part of the story is disconnected from the previous one. It does not agree with what has been said. Why wonder that there is someone without a wedding dress if the people were gathered on the street, in the fields, on the squares? It would be more surprising finding one wearing a gala attire. But what is out of place is the split personality of the sovereign. He acts like a schizophrenic: at first, he is generous and kind to the most unfortunate, then, suddenly, he gets upset, becomes terrible, even cruel.

The explanation is quite simple. The second part of the parable is not the continuation of the first. It is a new parable that is isolated and interpreted without reference to the previous one.

The theme that the evangelist wants to focus on is the possibility, even for those who have accepted the invitation to enter into the kingdom of God, to turn away from the logic of the Gospel. They risk failure as those who declined the invitation.

The new life of the Christian is often compared in the New Testament to a new dress, worn on the day of baptism. It is not enough to have received the sacrament; one needs to assume the appropriate behavior. One cannot present oneself with the rags of old life: adultery, dishonesty, disloyalty and moral debauchery. One cannot be content to put a new patch on the old garment but needs to completely revamp the kit. It must set life on the altogether new values.

As for the punishment inflicted on the man without a wedding attire, it should be noted, above all, that this rough way of expressing oneself is typical of Matthew. Only he often uses the expression “thrown out into extreme darkness” (Mt 8:12; 23:30) and “where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt 13:42-50; 23:30; 24:51....). The other evangelists do not use this language.

Matthew writes to the Jews who are used to be encouraged and reprimanded by their preachers with these strong expressions. These images are linked to the time and culture of the people of Israel. This fact should be kept in mind to avoid being an absurd and even blasphemous image of God, a God without heart and without mercy.

The purpose of the evangelist is to remind Christians—of his and our communities—of the seriousness of which they assume and carry out their baptismal commitments.

The last sentence: “Many (ie, “all”) are called, but few are chosen” (v. 14) is not related to any of the two parables that precede it. In them, the elect is many (almost all) and few are refused (only one).

We are faced with a saying that Jesus spoke in a different context. Matthew has inserted it here to shake with an affirmation the lethargy and apathy of some Christians of his community. It is often interpreted as an indication of the limited number of those who will enter paradise. However, here Jesus is not speaking of heaven, but of the kingdom of God, the new world in which one enters by adhering to his challenging proposal of life. All are invited, but few have the courage to take the decisive step. The majority hesitates, dithers, slackens. It is uncertain, not entirely convinced, that inside one will find a laden table. It's faltering to give up the security that comes from what one already has. Jesus warns against the risk of losing valuable time. One could arrive late, when the others are already having the cake or the fruit.

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