

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Aug 20th 2015

Memorial of Saint Bernard, Abbot and

Doctor of the Church

I must confess. I have long found today's Gospel reading to be one of the most challenging pieces of Scripture I've encountered. When I saw that I'd been assigned this passage to write about, my heart sunk. I had no idea what I'd write about a piece of Scripture I didn't even like to read, let alone write about. I think, however, that my instinctive emotional response has something to do with having first read this passage as a very young person.

Today's reading concludes with a wedding guest being thrown into what sounds like hell. We read, "Many are invited, but few are chosen (Matt 22:14)." As a young person, this made me feel like the path to the Kingdom of God was like a twisted joke. I could think and hope all along that I was doing the right things and following all the rules, and working really hard at it too, but then I'd find out I was wearing the wrong clothes at the gate in the final judgment, and there's I'd be too, amongst the wailing and grinding of teeth in the darkness outside the pearly gates, not even really understanding what I'd done right or wrong.

I'm a bit embarrassed to admit how much of this type of thinking I carried over into my adult life. Perhaps my faith did not mature over the years nearly as much as I thought it did? And certainly I was missing the historical context of Jesus' story.

Jesus tells this story in the final days before his death, and perhaps it is my own self who puts the sharpness of tone onto his words and perhaps he did not say it that way at all. Considering the timing of this story makes it hard to forget that Jesus performed his first miracle at a wedding feast a few years before, where he showered the guests with an abundance of fine wine at a similarly joyous occasion.

I am now aware that I had always construed this story about the wedding feast and the Kingdom of God as a story about death. And in recent years I have similarly considered how very much of my Christian life was lived walking toward death rather than toward life. And how obvious it seems in hindsight the error of my understanding and consequent actions. How clueless we are, for so many years, working so hard at all the wrong things!

And so it is with the characters in this story. Jesus is bursting with the news that the wedding feast in the Kingdom of God is ready, the very best occasion on earth, and yet the people he invites are too “busy” to attend. Others respond with violence towards the messengers of this amazing invitation to celebration and life and love. The abundance of the preparations is such that everyone, everywhere, good and bad, are all eventually invited to attend! No one is excluded from the invite list, and yet the party is not exactly hopping.

And then there is the troubling piece about the man, the “friend,” who isn’t wearing the proper wedding garments being thrown out into the wailing and teeth grinding as he stands there speechless. As it turns out, whomever was throwing the wedding feast during Jesus’ time provided the garments for the celebration as a gift to their guests, and so whomever this man was, he knew he was disrespecting the protocol and spirit of the event, perhaps even in a spirit of his own false pretense and motivation.

Meaningless work. Violence and anger. False pretense and motivation.

Jesus calls each of these things out as major roadblocks to participating in the joyous celebration of the Kingdom of God. All the best things that life can offer are right there in front of the people invited to the feast (which is everyone) and yet they’re missing it without even realizing what they’re missing.

In many ways the characters in this story are already dead. Jesus is not sentencing the characters in this story to death; he is begging them to live. He is calling them, He is calling all of us, to life. He doesn’t want us to miss it.

“I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He is not the God of the dead but of the living (Matthew 22:32).”

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