

Trinity 2

I take as my text from St. Luke's Gospel:

Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

Last week, the Gospel was the story of Lazarus and the rich man which focused our thoughts on what happens when we die. Of course, we have been trained throughout our lives that death is all about going to heaven or going to hell.

But what is hell, really? What is heaven?

While hell has been graphically depicted as consisting of fire and brimstone, a place of eternal fire and torment, from the standpoint of Christian theology, hell is defined as eternal separation from God, the total absence of God.

But what comes to mind when we think of heaven? We each have an image in our mind of what heaven is like. That image may have developed from what we've heard from family or friends, or clergy, or even read.

But more than a mere image, perhaps, what may be most comforting for us, as we think of heaven, is that from all the beauty that we can see in God's creation, both in this world in which we live and in the whole universe, it is only a foretaste of the beauty that is yet to be revealed.

People from different cultures, in different periods of history, have their own perceptions of what heaven is like.

For the Jewish people in the time of our Lord, their concept of the Messianic Kingdom, what they pictured, was a great banquet to celebrate the new age. The sea monster, Leviathan, would be served up as part of the fare. It would be a joyful occasion. However, it was a feast for Jews only, exclusive. No Jewish person would ever have dreamed that such a banquet would include Gentiles much less sinners at the table.

When the Messiah came to establish his kingdom on earth, he would inaugurate this banquet, this great feast, and all the ancient just people, though dead, would be raised up so that they too could enjoy the blessings.

In today's Gospel passage, we find Jesus at the home of a Pharisee, apparently a person of some prestige, where he has been invited for dinner. It was on the Sabbath, and Jesus had just raised a clamor by healing a man who had dropsy, that very act of healing a violation of the Sabbath.

Then, he addressed those present with several parables, mentioning in one the *resurrection of the just* during the Messiah's reign, the Messianic Banquet.

This prompted one of those in attendance to exclaim: ***Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God.***

At this point, as Luke recounts, Jesus tells the parable of the ***Great Supper***, taking the common Jewish notion of the Messianic Banquet as the basis to illustrate the true nature of that great feast; indeed, he reveals to us, through parable, the invitation, first to the Jews, then to the Gentiles and sinners, to all the world.

Did those present at supper get the meaning of his parable?

Most likely not, and those who saw through the symbolism were too offended to recognize the true meaning.

Indeed: ***Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God;*** but what Jesus did in the Parable of the Great Supper was to extend that blessing to all the world.

More than that. We can infer from the parable that, while the Jews were the first to turn down the invitation, they weren't the only ones. And we can also see from the parable that the invitation was not a solemn call but a joyful call. Truly, it's a parable to which we all can relate.

It was the custom of the time for guests to be invited well in advance for a dinner or feast. They would be given the day and an approximate time. Then, on the day, when all was ready, servants would be sent out to tell those invited that it was time, the dinner is ready to begin.

But, for this feast, no one came, each guest at the last minute coming up with a rather transparent excuse. In that culture, it was a grave insult to refuse at the last minute.

But as we see the servant returns each time with an excuse that conveys a meaning.

The first excuse: ***I have bought a piece of land and I must go and see it.*** Hardly a worthy excuse, for who would buy a piece of land sight unseen. Besides, how could one inspect a piece of land in the night?

This is the excuse of *necessity*, often used by those who neglect the affairs of religion because they are so caught up in the affairs of the world, who are so absorbed in their occupations and related issues that they have no time for anything else, much less God. They are so immersed in the world, they have no time to worship God, no time even to pray.

The second excuse: *I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them.*

Another excuse that is hardly worthy; who would take their newly acquired oxen into the fields at night to test them?

We could call this excuse: *disposition to self-gratification*. It relates to those whose possessions overtake them so that they have little interest in anything else. Any new distraction, whether hobby or friend, or most anything other than God, takes all their attention and leaves no time for worship or prayer.

And the final excuse: *I have married a wife and therefore I cannot come.*

Also a truly unworthy excuse, as the custom of the time, not only would the new bride be welcome, but also the entire wedding party.

This excuse represents the domestic cares and concerns that control so much of our time, those relationships of the home, the affections for family and friends that become excuses for failure to meet our obligations to God.

The master of the house, not to be outdone by the situation, filled his banquet room with strangers: *the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind*. And when there was still room, the servants gathered up people from *the highways and by-ways, from outside the city*.

No doubt, the parable had a chilling effect on those present. Now, today, it is very revealing of God's relationship to us and his Church.

As we have already observed, the atmosphere was very tense following the healing of the man with dropsy.

Jesus had further increased the tension by taking up the subject of places of honor at feasts and discussing entertaining the poor. He made the point of telling those present that they should not limit their invitations just to those who would return the favor. He said they should include others as well, in particular, those who may not be able to respond in turn by inviting the host to a similar occasion. In other words, Jesus was addressing the concept of true hospitality.

Interrupted by the interjection of *Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God*, Jesus turns to another parable, the **Parable of the Feast**, to further illustrate a truth by correcting the concept that the Kingdom of God is for Jews only.

Who do the characters in the parable represent?

The certain man is God; the servant is Jesus Christ.

Those bade to come to the supper are the privileged and prudent of Israel; the Scribes and Pharisees; all those who held position in the Jewish nation, in the local communities; and those of means and education.

The poor, the maimed, the halt and the lame represent the poor and unfortunate Jews, and those from the streets and lanes of the city represent the underprivileged Jews, all called to replace those who were bade to the feast and did not come.

And finally, those from the highways and hedges outside the city, they represent the outcast Gentiles.

The feast itself represents, in this situation, the Messianic Feast.

But what is the point?

In a sense, it's simple. Christ has issued God's call. That call was first given to the Jews, who rejected it. It was a call that required them to give up something in response. But, the Jewish leadership, subject to moral blindness and a perverted scale of values, could not put the kingdom of God first.

So, Christ extended that Divine call *outside the city*, that is, to the Gentiles. And, as we see in the story from St. Luke, that call was also extended to those who would be normally unacceptable, specifically in this case, the sinners, for the Pharisees and strict Jews looked upon the poor, the disabled, and the misfortunate, as sinners.

Indeed, it **was** the sinners, not the righteous Jews, and it **was** the Gentiles who responded readily and gladly to our Lord's call.

The parable of the feast, with all its parts, gives an interesting perspective of the world today, of the Church, of Christianity in general, and leads to a vision of today's world as being hostile to a loving, caring God, indeed, increasingly hostile to religion itself.

So, again, what is the point of the parable?

It can be expressed in rather simple fashion.

The invitation to salvation, to participate in the heavenly banquet, has been issued through our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ to all the world. We are all invited to share in the joy of the Messianic Feast.

But to participate — that is, the price of our admission to the feast — is in receiving and acting upon the Grace freely given to us: it comes down to one thing — we must accept the invitation and show up!

The invitation should not be lost among all the distractions of the world, all the distractions of life. God should be foremost in our lives. If he is, then all else will be retained in proper perspective, whether family, friends, career, and the joys of life.

Here, on earth, the Church is our banquet hall where we join together to break bread sharing in the Body and Blood of Christ, represented by the consecrated bread and wine.

We have no excuse. Our focus should be God, all else is subordinate.

The joy of life is fulfilled by God in and through us and is expressed not only in our worship of him but also in how we live our lives and conduct our relationships. It is fulfilled in the bond of love that unites us to God through his Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit acting upon us, and through us.

In the fullness of time, God sent his Son Jesus Christ for our salvation, and to establish the Church as his Body.

When we become members of the Body of Christ, members of Christ's Church, we must do so with joy that we have been invited to the Great Feast, and with willingness to dedicate ourselves to Christ through the Church he has established.

Granted, in the midst of all the easy and simplistic approaches to Christianity, to willingly conform our lives and lifestyles to the discipline of the Church is not an easy thing to do. But through corporate worship and participating in the Sacraments, we receive the strength we need to fulfill our commitment as members of Christ's Body, The One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

It is at the Eucharist where we feed on the Body and Blood of Christ, as a foretaste of the Heavenly Banquet that awaits us when we shall become the ones who are *blessed to eat bread in the kingdom of God*.