

TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Philippians 4:4-13; Matthew 22:1-14

The parable we have heard today in Matthew's Gospel contains some points that may be difficult to understand. However, the intent and the meaning of the Parable is perfectly clear. The king in the story stands for God. The guests invited to the feast are the children of Israel, and the king's troops is probably a reference to the Romans who burned Jerusalem in AD 70. The people found in the highways and byways are probably the Gentiles. But, what matters is that the king gave a banquet and the chosen guests rejected the invitation to attend. They even made light of the invitation and went away, one to his farm, another to his business.

Twenty centuries ago, this was troubling to those present when Jesus told a parable about an invitation to a joyous occasion that is rejected by the honored guests, and is then offered to those considered to be the undesirables of society. The reality is that it is just as troubling to us today. If we look around, we will realize that our world still makes light of the Good News of God through the Gospels. It is not just that the Gospel is ignored; it is ridiculed. The word "God" is used in the most casual and disrespectful way we imaginable, and the name of Jesus has become a swear word and an oath.

Instead of approaching God with awe, we encounter unconcern

and blasphemy. People are afraid of religious expressions of faith. We hear ridiculous phrases in the media such as: “We have thrown God out of the classroom; we have pushed God out of the children's lives by not having school prayer”, as though we little human beings can ever push God out of our lives.

Now please notice that the passage doesn't say that, because the invited guests did not come to the banquet, the wedding was canceled. Just the opposite. The wedding and the feast were to go on as scheduled. The only thing changed is the guest list.

God does not change His plans because of the disinterest of human beings. God does not cancel the feast. The choice is up to us. It is up to us to either accept or reject the invitation to joy.

The feast is still there for those who would honor the invitation and come to the banquet. But most of us have other things to think about. We have work to do. We have our jobs. We don't have time to read about the faith, to worship with others, to serve others; we have work to do.

No excuse is acceptable when the offering is a matter of life and death. We cannot even use our families, our dearest and nearest, as an excuse for staying away from the Kingdom, the parable tells us. Our spiritual survival is at stake. Yet, we make up excuses, and are attracted by the affairs of the world, more than by the needs of the spirit.

We are consumed by looking after number one; our lives are too busy and cluttered; too noisy to hear the invitation to a banquet of joy. And when we are reminded of it, we are embarrassed.

We have found other things to occupy our time and consume our energy. When we are asked to take time to pray, to think, to learn God's truth, to share it with others, to focus on what is of eternal importance instead of on temporary needs, we make fun of it. The cares of this world appear much greater than the cares

of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Listen to what St. Paul says to the Philippians about this banquet of joy. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice."

And how does this joy manifest itself? In gentleness, in awareness of the nearness of Christ, in lack of worry, and in peace. All this is achieved through prayer as we bring our requests before God with thanksgiving, he tells us. St. Paul urges those who have accepted God's invitation to the banquet to remain there by thinking of whatever is honorable, true, pure, pleasing, commendable, of things that are excellent and worthy of praise. In hunger or in plenty, he tells the Philippians, he has learned to be content, because he can do all things through Him who strengthens him, through Christ who was his life.

Turning our back on the cares of the world in order to go to the banquet, in order to focus our minds on God, is not achieved because we are already good and holy. Our passage from Matthew's Gospel tells us that the servants of the King invited both those who were good and those who were bad. They were invited because of the generosity of the king, not because they had done something to deserve the invitation.

Isn't that a comforting thought? How many of us are still hesitating because of fear that attending the feast will make too many demands upon our time, limit our worldly pleasures, will hinder our ambitions? There is no question that the one who makes the offer will not accept second place in our affection. It is true that accepting the invitation to God's banquet of joy changes our sense of what is important and valuable.

Jesus leaves us with a question from this parable. How are we going to respond to God's invitation to his banquet? Some fail to make it because they come with the wrong attitude, they want to come to God's feast because they believe they deserve it. But

others fail to respond to God's invitation because they don't really believe that they are invited.

In the late 1800's, there was an old woman in Scotland who lived in great poverty. Her only son had gone to the United States many years earlier. One day, a friend seeing her poverty asked: "Doesn't your son ever help you"? "No" she replied, "but he does send me interesting pictures". The friend was about to say harsh words about the son, but instead asked if he could see the pictures. The woman went to her drawer and showed him "the pictures". They were on hundreds and hundreds of dollars of paper money. She had been living in poverty for many years when there was no need for it.

Many people do not cash in the treasure that God offers to us, simply because we do not value the gift that God extends to us.

Let us not be unwise by failing to respond to His invitation to partake of what the Book of Revelation refers to as the Great Wedding Feast of the Lamb.

AMEN.