

**Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A  
(Oct. 12, 2014)**

**Heavenly Banquets**

Did you ever wonder who you would be sitting next to at the heavenly banquet? The question is not as silly as it might sound. One of the most popular metaphors in the Bible for heaven and what heaven will be like is the image of a banquet such as we have in both our first reading from Isaiah and in the Gospel parable. Mind you, Jesus doesn't say that's what it will be. He says that's what it will be like. And at the moment, like seems very good to me.

Isaiah is talking about the end time, what will happen when the Lord comes to gather us all together. His image is not very different from that of Jesus. Indeed Jesus probably got the idea for his story from Isaiah. In Isaiah's vision we'll all come together on the mountain of the Lord to feast sumptuously on rich food and vintage wines – and if you don't like wine, I'm sure there will be plenty of whatever your beverage of choice might be. Most important, God will destroy the veil that veils all people, that is the barriers that people set up as divisions among themselves and the web that entangles them in their own selfish attitudes and prevents them from recognizing one another as brother and sister. Moreover there will be no more tears, no more death or dying, only the sheer happiness that moves us all to shout and sing, "Let us rejoice and be glad that the Lord has saved us."

Well, Jesus picks up this beautiful vision, but he gives it a twist of his own. In the Gospel the image is not just a metaphor for the kingdom of God. It becomes a cautionary tale as well, just as we saw last week that the parable of the vineyard became a cautionary tale. And indeed the message is much the same. The people Jesus addresses are the same as those who heard the parable of the vineyard: the religious leaders of the people, the priests, the scribes, the Pharisees. These are the ones who have received an invitation but who have refused it, that is, they rejected Jesus. Now these same people know that Jesus keeps company with sinners, prostitutes, outcasts, the lowest members of society, people that they would never be

caught dead with. They certainly would not want to sit down with them at the heavenly banquet table. Well, the sinners, the prostitutes, the outcasts are those in the story from the highways and the byways, all those people the king's servants rounded up when they went out to gather them in. people who in fact responded to the invitation, that is, they accepted Jesus.

Now this same parable appears in Luke's Gospel as well as in Matthew's, and as Luke tells the story, that's where it ends – with everybody at the banquet having a good time, very positive and upbeat. Matthew however decides to add a second cautionary tale, the story of the one poor soul who comes in without a wedding garment and is thrown out into the darkness where he will weep and grind his teeth. Not a very pretty picture. It even seems to spoil the happy ending of Luke's parable – happy at least for those who accept the invitation.

Well, what was the problem? Now if the king's servants went out and brought in anybody they found on the streets, there must have been many beggars, poor people, homeless people among them. But there was only one who was not properly clothed. Apparently all the others in spite of their poverty were able to find the proper garments, and this one person did not take the time or make the effort to change his clothes or clean the ones that he was wearing, so he is thrown out of the party. So what is the meaning? Once again as I said it is a cautionary tale. Who is Jesus cautioning? This time Matthew has him speak this parable not so much to the scribes and Pharisees and priests of his own time, but to the people Matthew is addressing in his own community, the new Christians, and what he is cautioning them against is complacency. They are people who have accepted the invitation to follow Jesus, but having decided to follow Jesus, they now have certain obligations. Their Christian commitment obliges them to a particular way of life, to love God and their neighbor in ways that are spelled out in the Gospel. Not to accept those obligations would be to come to the feast without a wedding garment, and Matthew has Jesus say these very strong words about the fate of those who do not live up to their Christian obligations as a warning.

I think the lesson for us is quite obvious. We have all been invited, and we have sent back the RSVP, and indeed here we are. And here indeed we have a banquet, not a far off feast at the end of time, but one that is daily

available, a feast of the finest spiritual food and the finest spiritual drink imaginable. It's a feast that is already doing what Isaiah said would happen on the Lord's mountain at the end of time. It's breaking down the barriers that keep us apart. It's making us the Body of Christ, a community of believers, people who are loving, caring, warm, open to others, to all others, welcoming all those that the Lord loves – which of course means everybody without exception. If we do not do those things, then we are like the person who came to the party without the proper clothes.

Another thing that occurs to me is that we become the servants of the king – and now He, Christ, our King, sends us out to bring the message of salvation, the message of God's love to others, to all others, not just those we are naturally attracted to, but those, too, who perhaps have not felt the warmth of another's love, to say nothing of God's love, who have not felt the encouragement of a friendly smile, the assistance of a helping hand, and indeed, the loan or better still, the gift of a suitable garment so that they, too, could come and be part of the party. It's our Christian commitment. It's what we have been called to do and with the grace of God and the encouragement of one another we will do it.