

Trinity XVIII
11 October 2020

Readings: Isaiah 25: 1-9, Psalm 23, Philippians 4: 1-9, Matthew 22: 1-14

Our first reading from Isaiah is a wonderful passage, one filled with hope in God's power to save and restore. The writer begins by speaking of God's destruction of a city, a city that stands for human pride and oppression, a city that stands for all those institutions, usually located in large and powerful cities, that oppress and enslave people. These institutions might be governmental or they might be financial. For the Hebrew people carried off into slavery in 586 B.C. the city would be Babylon; for those in the gulags of Siberia the city would be the Kremlin in Moscow; or for those caught up in the web of an international trading system that is unfair and exploitative the city could be a financial centre such as the City in London or Wall Street in New York. The good news is that God is not going to put up with this exploitation and oppression: 'For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the palace of aliens is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt' (Is. 25: 2). But at the same time those in charge of these exploitative cities will come to see the truth: 'Therefore strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you' (Is.25: 3). Repentance, a turning to God is possible. Recall how the king and the people of the wicked city of Nineveh repented in Jonah 3:6-10.

The poor who have been oppressed and exploited will be comforted. They will, along with all peoples, be invited to 'a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear' (Is. 25: 6). But this is no temporary banquet; it is no less than the coming of God's kingdom, a kingdom in which God 'will swallow up death forever' and 'wipe away the tears from all faces' (Is. 25: 8).

This is a magnificent vision, one that influenced Paul when he was writing to the Corinthians (I Cor. 15: 54-55), as well as the writer of the Revelation to John (Rev. 7:17, 21: 4). It is above all a vision that shows God acting for us.

But then we have our gospel for today, that strange story about a king giving a wedding feast. The king is a stand-in for God. We can thus connect the burning of the city in this parable with the destruction of the exploitative and oppressive city in Isaiah 25. And we can connect those who made excuses for not attending the banquet to those who choose not to believe in God. But what about the wedding guest who was not wearing attire suitable for the occasion? Who is he? Why is he cast out for this seemingly small thing?

I think that this guest was probably standing over in a corner of the banqueting hall, just looking on. He was probably in his corner because he knew he was not properly dressed and wanted to make himself less noticed. He was

interested in watching, but wasn't really involved in the feast.

If I read this story right, Jesus is trying to say that God calls us to get involved in helping him build his kingdom. God calls us to get involved in opposing the institutions and people in this world who exploit and oppress. This is a God of newness, a God of possibility, a God of change for the better. When God calls us to his banquet he is calling us to participate in life with him. He is calling us to real life, life that is truly satisfying and fulfilling. But if we are to know this life, we cannot hold back; we cannot stand in a corner or sit on the sidelines. Life with God is not just participation in a set of rituals or mouthing some prayers. Life with God means putting God at the centre and letting God in Jesus lead us.

Centring ourselves on God and letting Jesus lead us do not come naturally to us, especially us who live in the wealthy part of this planet. I wonder if we could take heed from the life of Francis of Assisi. Francis, although the son of a wealthy family, deliberately embraced poverty. In connection with this I'd like to quote from a recent sermon by Alban McCoy, a Franciscan. McCoy writes that Francis

‘chose absolute poverty because he saw through the illusion of ownership. No matter how many things we possess, we don't actually own anything. We can't count even our lives our own: they're given to us and taken from us. In letting go, St Francis turned worldly values upside down: where others saw security, he saw captivity; what for others represented success, was for him a source of strife, an obstacle to loving God and neighbour. The space previously occupied by all these things was now filled with something the world can't give us, a joy that exceeded even his considerable powers of description. What his life teaches us, is that letting go may leave you empty-handed, but clinging on to whatever you can get your hands on, leaves you empty-hearted.’

God wants to give us the same joy that Francis had. Even though we may not be called by God to embrace the life of Francis, I think we are all called to sit lightly to the things of this world so that, since worldly things can so easily cause us either to refuse God's invitation outright or simply to pay it lip service.

Thanks be to God that he never ceases to invite us to his feast and that Jesus is always seeking to give us the clothing we need to wear: the love that enables us to love God by loving our neighbour.

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