

SERMON - The Great Banquet - Luke 14:16-24, December 15, 2019

In Judaism, meals had become familiar expressions of common identity, social unity and communal celebration. The community associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls came together at banquets, as did the Pharisees with others of their kind to partake of pure food and company. Even the weekly Sabbath meal was an occasion for families to come together and enjoy a night of festive fellowship unique to their own heritage. So great were these celebratory communal meals that the afterlife came to be viewed as a great banquet at the end of time. The Hebrew Bible and extra biblical Jewish writings describe the great messianic feast on the mountain of the Lord: "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines" (Isaiah 25:6ff.). It will be an "unfailing table" (4 Ezra 9:19) where "the righteous and elect ones...shall eat and rest and rise with that Son of Man forever and ever" (1 Enoch 62:12-14). This theme was later picked up by the authors of the New Testament.

In Palestinian and Middle Eastern culture, the invitations to a banquet were sent out very early. To be invited to sit at banquet with your host and his family was considered a great honor. While at table and sharing food with your host, you were considered to be an extension and part of the family you were dining with. To respond in the affirmative to the invitation and the not to come, offering weak and shallow excuses, would be a huge insult. After all, you had plenty of time to prepare, and you already decided that you would come. You already knew about these obligations ahead of time that you are now offering as excuses. What is your host to think, except that you are deliberately now rejecting his invitation? In today's Gospel, on the one hand, the chosen people of God, the Hebrews, are all invited to God's heavenly banquet. Their place, in theory, should be the first place at the table. Secondly, God invites all of us to his heavenly banquet, Jew and non-Jew alike. Collectively, the Jews reject the invitation to the heavenly banquet when they reject the Messiah. Gentiles take the place of the Jews whose seats are now vacant at the table. Another aspect of today's Gospel is that the invitation to the great banquet is the same as being invited to do God's work and to share in the life in Christ, whether it be to pray, to attend church, to participate in the Holy Mysteries, to do good deeds, to feed, clothe and shelter the poor and the needy, to love God and our brothers and sisters as God loves us. If we refuse God's invitation and offer all sorts of excuses as did those originally invited in today's Gospel, it will be very bad for us, for our Lord will be greatly displeased, and instead of sitting at the eternal heavenly banquet with our heavenly host, we will instead be cast into the fire of perdition, because we refused the heavenly invitation and chose to consider earthly things more important. We only get one life and we only get one chance. That is why it is so crucial that we choose wisely what we do with our life and how we prioritize everything in our life. God should always be our first priority. If we have faith, isn't God able to help us with all of the other concerns that we face in life? The biggest mistake we can make is when we rely on ourselves and give credit to ourselves instead of relying first and above all on God.

All these excuses that are offered on the day of the banquet are not necessarily bad things. However, none of these things, such as having a wife, as well as any contemporary excuse that we might feebly offer today, were not meant to be used selfishly. They who have a home and live with a wife do best when they make a home for God in their hearts and who first tend to the things of God and to Christ in one's heart before tending to anything else. There is an essential truth to an inscription found on the walls of a Medieval Church:

God the Lord speaks to you:
You call me eternal - but you seek me not;
You call me almighty - but you fear me not;
You call me merciful - but you honour me not;
You call me the Light - but you seek me not;
You call me the Way - but you walk me not;
You call me the Truth - but you believe me not;
You call me the Life - but you desire me not;
You call me lovely - but you love me not;
You call me Master - but you serve me not;
If I condemn you, reprove me not.

It is so very often true - And yet is it not a terrible thing that it should be true? How can there be such a hideous gap between the words that come so easily from our lips and the actions of our life-? "Please

consider me excused." If we truly worship then we must answer the call to serve. Otherwise we will hear the sorrowful, yet condemning voice, "Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46)

Let there be no excuses - Let us all come forth.

"Whosoever is a devout lover of God, let him enjoy this beautiful bright Festival. And whosoever is a grateful servant, let him rejoice and enter into the joy of his Lord" (From the Easter Catechetical Sermon of Saint John Chrysostom).

Let there be no excuses! Amen.