

Parable of the Wedding Banquet

St Martha's, Bethany Beach

October 11, 2020

Isaiah 25:1-9

Psalm 23

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We live in strange times, do we not? On the one hand, there is the Covid-19 pandemic to contend with, and on the other hand we are experiencing an election campaign like no other. Thinking about these two things can take up so much of our time and attention that we can easily forget to do something that is very important. I realize that all of us have genuine concerns about our country, and about the lives and well-being of our family and friends. But I hope you can find time for this one important thing, which you can all do, regardless of where you are, or how old you are, or who you are. The thing we need to do, is to close our eyes and *dream*.

By the way, this is not an exercise in escaping from reality. Quite the opposite. I want you to imagine how reality could be different and better - what is your dream for the world in which you live?. The word "dream" is one of those words like "love" whose meanings are various. The original meaning of dream comes from our sleeping life, when our subconscious mind uses the raw material of our waking lives to create new scenes and situations. But there is another meaning for "dream" which applies when we are awake: we dream of how things could be, and as Christians we draw upon the divine imagination in fashioning these dreams.

One of our greatest dreamers was Jesus Christ, for whom the conscious and the subconscious were as one. For Jesus there was only one reality, not two. In Jesus there is no division, and in him all things hold together. Jesus was no sentimentalist. When Jesus dreams he doesn't see harpists sitting on fluffy clouds, but rather human beings going about their daily lives.

The dream of Jesus is the kingdom of heaven. And Jesus shares this dream with us in stories we call parables. They are filled with people and situations which are familiar to us. They are like clues in a puzzle which Jesus wants us to solve. By using our imagination and intelligence, we can unlock the puzzle and gain understanding.

In today's gospel, Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven as "compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son." This is an easy one for us to decipher, if we say that the "king" in the parable stands for God the Father and the "son", for whom the wedding banquet is given, is Jesus.

In this allegory the king has made everything ready for the banquet - all that's needed now are the guests. And so the invitations go out, carried by the slaves who call people to the banquet. But those who are the first to be invited decide to stay away. The invitation is sent out a second time, but the poor slaves who carry the invitation are beaten and killed. So what happens now? Instead of slaves, will the king send out his courtiers?

No. If the first invitees are not interested, then the invitation will go out to others found in the "main streets." The Greek word here is *diexodos* - which can be translated as "street corners"

or “thoroughfares”. It is sometimes taken to refer to the place where the street goes through the city boundary and out into the open country.

Whom do we find beyond the city boundary? In Jesus’ day, that meant the lepers. We read that the slaves “gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.” So now we have a complete picture of the kingdom of heaven. Imagine yourself in this wedding hall, seated at table, waiting for the arrival of the king. While you are waiting, look and see who is on your left and who is on your right. Fellow guests, both good *and* bad. Mind you, they may be looking at you and thinking, “how did *they* get in?” But because this is a parable about the kingdom of heaven, what you will experience is not a judging of your fellow human beings, but an invincible sense of belonging, of being in the right place at the right time with the right people. The wedding banquet - the kingdom of heaven - is a place of love, forgiveness and joy.

Can we close our eyes and dream about that now? Other people have had a dream like that. Do you remember Martin Luther King Jr, saying, “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’” The dream that King articulated reflects the reality of God’s creation, namely, that all human being beings are created in the likeness of God.

The dream *can* become a reality. But first we have to make the dream ours, too. Those who were invited to the banquet and yet refused to go, showed that they were unwilling to dream. They were too occupied with worldly matters. They didn’t imagine a world beyond the one in which they were involved. They heard the call - the invitation - but didn’t take it seriously, or reacted violently against it, and turned back to what was familiar - to their farm, or to their business.

Let us now return to our wedding banquet, which is filled with dreamers, good and bad alike, who have the imagination to dream. The bad ones, especially, couldn’t believe their luck. They were in! Who were they? Presumably, the sinners, the ne’er-do-wells, who were probably the most surprised to hear themselves being invited. What had *they* done to deserve the king’s favor? Their judgment couldn’t have been on themselves, or they too, may have refused to come. Instead, they trusted in the judgment of God, whose mercy is beyond measure.

Inside the banqueting hall, there is an air of expectation as the people wait for the arrival of the king. The food is prepared and about to be served. Here is a dream of the kingdom of heaven, where everyone will be fed and no-one will go hungry. But then, just as the king arrives and the banquet is about to start, there is a problem. One of the guests is not wearing a wedding robe. The king asks him, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” The guest does not reply, and the king orders him to be bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness. The king says, “For many are called, but few are chosen.”

This is a difficult parable to interpret. One of the conclusions we can draw is that life in the kingdom of heaven is not reserved for the good and denied to the bad, since both good and bad are invited. What then? Let us try to understand the heart of this parable. Obviously it is not enough simply to show up at the wedding banquet. You must be properly attired in a “wedding robe.” What does this mean?

You know if you are invited to a wedding you don't go in jeans and a t-shirt. You put on your best clothes so that you are suitably dressed for the occasion. This dressing up is a mark of respect towards the couple and the host. The man who did not take the trouble to prepare for the banquet and was not suitably attired, was bound and cast into darkness. Perhaps, in the crowd, he thought that the king would not notice him? But the king does see him - the king who sees into the hearts and minds of all his subjects.

In our parable, what would *our* wedding robe be? I think it would be one which is woven from the strands of repentance, thankfulness and love. Here I wish to draw a parallel between the wedding banquet and the Eucharist. We prepare to receive the Eucharist by putting on the wedding robe of repentance, thankfulness and love. We repent of our sins, we give thanks to God for his mercy, and we follow the command of Jesus to love God and love neighbor.

When we come before the Lord's table on Sunday, or indeed any day of the week, we should be mindful of this parable and prepare ourselves in the proper way. The Eucharist is our earthly banquet, which draws us up towards heaven. To prepare ourselves, we should carefully put on the garment of repentance, thankfulness and love.

You can open your eyes now. I hope that the dream you dreamed when your eyes were closed will continue after your eyes have opened. Jesus has a dream for us which, I hope, will become your dream too. Amid all of life's distractions and changes there is a banquet being prepared for us, and so let us make time today to stop and dream about what that will be like, and wonder at God's invitation to us. Take out the wedding robe, and place it around you, so that you will be ready to enter into the kingdom of heaven.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Father David Beresford