

The readings for Sunday, October 15, 2017:

First Reading: Isaiah 25:1-9

First Reading (Semi-cont.): Exodus 32:1-14

Psalm: Psalm 23

Psalm (Semi-cont.): Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23

Second Reading: Philippians 4:1-9

Gospel: Matthew 22:1-14

Today's Gospel sounds impossibly harsh. The kingdom of heaven is compared to this story of a king who can't get people to come to the wedding feast? Is God really like the King who murders people who won't come to the party and burns their city? Is God really like the king who punishes a guest who comes in the wrong clothes? And such a punishment!

Some churchgoers, no doubt, will hear a sermon this Sunday that revolves around judgment and punishment. My opinion is that God rarely has to punish us, because our poor choices provide punishment enough.

So, let's look at this parable from a different angle: what's keeping us from accepting the invitation to the wedding feast? If the wedding feast is the kingdom of God, what keeps us away?

Obviously, as we devote more and more of our time to work, we have less time for the things that matter, like family, God, our friends. Many of us don't have time to eat; some of us can't even slip away to go to the bathroom! Jesus is quite clear on this issue: we must prioritize. What good will it do us to work ourselves this way, to devote ourselves to earthly things, like work and earning money?

Or maybe we reject God's invitation because we feel inadequate. We'll accept at a later time, when we've improved ourselves. But that's the good news of God's grace that we find throughout the Gospels. We don't have to wait. God loves us in all of our imperfections.

Perhaps we should see ourselves in the wedding guest that didn't have the right garment. What clothes do we need to invest in to make ourselves better wedding guests?

Maybe we need to clothe ourselves in the garments of love and acceptance. Think of what attitudes you need to wrap around yourself, and work to shed the ones that do not serve you.

Maybe we need to clothe ourselves in some regular spiritual practices. We have thousands of years of history that suggest some techniques that work: regular prayer, regular spiritual reading, cultivating a spirit of gratitude, taking a day of rest, singing the Psalms to calm our nerves, and the list could fill a book.

Life is short, and Christ returns to this message again and again. We think we will have time to get to the things that will be important. We'll do it later, when the kids are older, or when we don't have to work so long and hard. We'll do it when we retire. We'll wait until we have more money. Once we lose that 20-100 pounds, we'll buy the right clothes and go to feasts to celebrate sacred occasions.

But God calls us to focus on the important things now. The apocalyptic tone of the recent readings may seem overly dramatic, but apocalypse dramas remind us that everything that is precious can be gone in an instant--and so the time to focus on what we hold dear is now.

It's a luxury that so many do not have, to appreciate what we have while we still have it, to be able to tell our loved ones that we love them while they're still with us.