

## TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)

*Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost*

Isaiah 25:6-10a; Matthew 22:1-14

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

We don't like contradictions. But today's First Reading and today's Gospel, seem to be proclaiming two different, quite distinct, messages.

The prophet Isaiah takes us high atop the holy mountain — mount Zion — Jerusalem. And he proclaims the wondrous vision of the Lord providing a festive banquet for **all people** — a banquet endless and rich. And that vision, that promise, is very much to our liking! After all, who could argue with a freebie? Marvelous Isaiah! It's no wonder that he's been called the fifth Evangelist. Isaiah gives us the Lord God who “*wipes away tears from all faces, and takes away the reproach of his people.*” It is a clear message of **hope** and **promise**. It is **good news!**

But then we come to our Reading from St. Matthew. And in contrast to the prophet Isaiah, Jesus comes across as **rather strict**, and something of a kill-joy.

Christ tells a parable about some people **refusing** to come to a lavish wedding feast — a feast for the Son of the King. And so, the call goes out to **everyone** who is on the margins. And that sounds pretty good to us. We tend to like the idea of all of the outcasts being invited in.

But there is a glitch at the end of the story. The King notices one man in the banquet hall who isn't wearing a wedding garment. And because he's wearing the wrong clothing, the King orders him “*[bound] hand and foot, and cast...into the outer darkness, where there [is] weeping and gnashing of teeth.*”

Well. The Old Testament Reading from Isaiah seems **full** of the **Gospel**, but what's going on with Jesus? Why does he tell a parable which end on such a harsh note? Why does Jesus conclude with the Law and Judgement?

Anglican Bishop N. T. Wright comments on today's Gospel, and he writes these words:

*[T]his parable...bothers people*

*because it doesn't say what we want it to.*

*We want to hear a nice story*

*about God throwing the party open to everyone.*

*We want — as people now fashionably say —*

*to be inclusive, to let everyone in.*

*We don't want to know about judgment on the wicked,*

*or about demanding standards of holiness,*

*or about weeping and gnashing of teeth...*

*[But] there [is] a difference between God's wide-open invitation*

*and the message so many want to hear today.*

Bishop Wright is surely correct. We are often tempted to confuse God's love and his mercy and his forgiveness, with *tolerance*. But again, there is a *fundamental* difference. God has a solution to the problem of our sin. But the solution *is not* tolerance. When God sees our wicked deeds, when he sees our self-focused lives — when he sees our sin — he doesn't say, "Oh, that's alright. It doesn't really matter. Just keep on doing what you're doing. It'll be okay."

*No*. God's solution to the problem of our sin, is the death of his Son on the cross. God's solution to the problem of our sin, is to baptize us into the death and resurrection of his Son. God's solution to the problem of our sin is *not* to tolerate it! No, but to *forgive* it! To forgive it through the blood of his Son — *and to call us, and equip us, for new life* in the Spirit.

The old Adam — the old Eve — wants to hear that everyone is all right just exactly as they are. The old sinner wants to hear that God loves us as we are, and doesn't want us to change. It is one more attempt to try and justify ourselves. One more attempt to try and convince ourselves that we're really not so bad, afterall.

But if we're really not so bad, why did Jesus have to go to the cross?

If we're really not so bad, why did God have to offer his Son?

Again from Bishop Wright:

*When the blind and lame came to Jesus,*

*he didn't say, "You're all right as you are." He healed them.*

*They wouldn't have been satisfied with anything less.*

*When the prostitutes and extortioners came to Jesus...*

*he didn't say, "You're all right as you are."*

*His love reached them where they were,*

*but his love refused to let them stay as they were.*

*Love wants the best for the beloved.*

*Their lives were transformed, healed, changed.*

*Actually, nobody really believes that God wants everyone,*

*to stay exactly as they are.*

*God loves serial killers and child molesters;*

*God loves ruthless and arrogant businessmen;*

*God loves manipulative mothers*

*who damage their children's emotions for life.*

*But the point of God's love is that he wants [sinners] to change.*

*He hates what they're doing*

*and the effect it has on everyone else —*

*and on themselves, too.*

When I think about the man thrown out of the banquet hall in today's parable, I'm reminded of Christ's encounter with the woman caught in adultery in the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's Gospel (vs 3-11). The scribes and the Pharisees have

caught this woman in her sin, and they ask Jesus about whether she should be stoned as stipulated in the law of Moses. Jesus dispels their self-righteous attitude by responding, “*Let him who is without sin...be the first to throw a stone at her.*” And one by one, all of her accusers leave. Finally, Jesus says to her, “*Neither do I condemn you.*” Jesus forgives her.

But he doesn’t leave it at that. For then he adds, “*Go, and do not sin again.*” The gift of forgiveness is ***always accompanied*** by the call to repentance. The gift of forgiveness is always accompanied by the call to new life.

The wedding garment then, is the new life we receive through faith in Christ. And the wedding garment is itself a ***gift***, freely given by God. In our Baptismal liturgy, the newly baptized person is ***given*** a white garment to wear, and these words are proclaimed:

*Put on this robe,  
for in Baptism you have been clothed  
in the righteousness of Christ,  
who calls you to his great feast.*

Those words are an echo of St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians where he writes: “*as many of you as were baptized into Christ have **put on Christ***” (3:27).

The wedding garment then, is simply the righteousness of Christ Jesus himself. So to try and enter the feast without the wedding garment, is to try and enter ***without*** the righteousness of Christ! It is to try and enter without the new life, without the new way of living, that is itself ***God’s gift to you!*** God’s gift, through faith in Jesus.

Martin Luther expressed it like this; he wrote:

*Faith, which puts on the righteousness of Christ,  
is the true wedding garment.  
[Such faith] is active through love  
and does the works of love. (WA, 39 I, 265, 5 [1537])*

Dear friends, God has called you to the marriage feast of his Son. And more than that, he has also supplied you with your wedding garment. Come now, and experience a foretaste of the banquet!

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