

28th Sunday Ordinary Time, Year A

The marriage feast in today's Gospel (Matthew 22:1-14) is that of Jesus, for he is the king's son, the bridegroom who is in love with the human race and who invites everyone to the banquet prepared by his Father. Jesus refers to himself as a bridegroom quite early in Matthew's Gospel (9:15) and returns to this same image in his parable of the bridesmaids, half of whom were well prepared, with oil in their lamps ready to burn at the appropriate time, but the other half did nothing, only to find that they were too late to attend the wedding (Matthew 25:1-13). The image of the wedding feast is a daring one, highlighting the intimacy of love into which Jesus calls us.

John, the beloved disciple, saw this truth as so central to the gospel that he opens his account of Jesus' ministry at a wedding banquet in Cana (John 2:1-11) and those of you who are familiar with the Book of Revelation know that it reaches its climax in a magnificent scene in which Jesus, having been crucified but now victorious, takes his bride, redeemed humanity, to himself that they might enjoy forever the intimacy of love (Revelation 19:7; 21:2). We find Paul using the same image when he writes to the community in Corinth: 'I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ' (2Corinthians 11:2. See Ephesians 5:32).

Jesus is continuing an image found in the Hebrew Scriptures which speak of God as a bridegroom offering his love to Israel (Isaiah 54:5-8. See also 62:4-5; Ezekiel 16:8-14; Hosea 2:19-20). When the prophets looked forward to the time when the people and God would live in a consistent communion of love, they used the image of a banquet - a wedding feast. Today's Responsorial Psalm speaks of God preparing a banquet for us. This Mass we are now celebrating is the banquet. This is the love feast. This is, as we now say before communion (drawing on the Apocalypse) 'the Banquet of the Lamb', where we disciples of Jesus come together to hear Jesus speak words of love to us in the Liturgy of the Word, and give himself for us and to us in the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

In the Gospel those invited found excuses to stay away. They were too busy. They had other priorities. It was too much trouble. It is the same today. We can find all sorts of excuses for not coming to the Eucharist on Sunday. Today we are invited to stop and think what it is to which we are being invited. We are hungry and thirsty and God who loves us is drawing us into the closest union conceivable here on earth. Jesus, the Bridegroom of our souls wants to enter deep within us.

Everyone acknowledges how the Church needed reform in the sixteenth century. The way it happened, however, tore Western Christianity apart. Among other matters, the whole meaning of the Eucharist was called into question. In an attempt to protect people against the ravages of erroneous teaching, the Church insisted on attending Mass under pain of mortal sin. This was a way of insisting on the seriousness of the obligation binding people to attend Mass on Sundays. To neglect attending Mass with

the community when there was no real excuse was a sign of a breakdown of our relationship with God and with each other.

Whatever of the past, today the focus is on welcome and not on sin, but the Church still insists on the importance of attending Mass. It matters that we come to the Marriage Feast and do not stay away. It matters for ourselves personally and it matters for the community. We need love – we need God's love and, as Jesus said: 'Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you cannot have life in you'(John 6:53). The recent Catechism states: 'The faithful are obliged to participate in the Eucharist on days of obligation, unless excused for a serious reason. Those who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin'(n.2181). The Catechism goes on to say (n.1380), quoting Pope John-Paul II: 'The Church and the world have a great need for Eucharistic worship. Jesus awaits us in this sacrament of love. Let us not refuse the time to go to meet him in adoration, in contemplation full of faith, and open to making amends for the serious offences and crimes of the world. Let our adoration never cease'(Dominicae Cenaе, 3).

We still speak of the obligation to come to Mass. The word 'obligation' is a good one. It comes from two Latin words: 'ligare', which means to bind, and 'ob' meaning 'right up against'. An obligation is a close bond, in this case a bond of love. We belong to Christ by an intimate bond and it really matters that we experience communion with him in the Eucharist. Likewise we are bound to each other and we owe it to each other to strengthen one another's faith. To stay away for no real reason except laziness or a passing whim, or a failure to appreciate the beauty of communion or to care for those who need us and whom we need, is to act like those in the Gospel who found trivial excuses for staying away from the wedding feast.

Seventy years after Jesus' death, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, explained why Christians come together on the Lord's day: 'We have seen how former adherents of the ancient customs have since attained to a new hope; so that they have given up keeping the Sabbath, and now order their lives by the Lord's day instead, the day when life first dawned for us, thanks to him and his death. That death, though some deny it, is the very mystery which has moved us to become believers, and endure tribulation to prove ourselves pupils of Jesus Christ, our sole teacher' (Letter to the Magnesians n.9).

A generation later, a man called Justin, a philosopher who had become a Christian, attempted to explain this to the Emperor who, failing to understand Christianity, was responsible for persecuting the Church: 'On the day we call the day of the sun, all who dwell in the city or country gather in the same place. The memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read, as much as time permits. When the reader has finished, he who presides over those gathered admonishes and challenges them to imitate these beautiful things. Then we all rise together and offer prayers for ourselves ... and for all others, wherever they may be, so that we may be found righteous by our life and actions, and faithful to the commandments, so as to obtain eternal salvation. When the prayers are concluded we exchange the kiss. Then someone brings bread and

a cup of water and wine mixed together to him who presides over the brethren. He takes them and offers praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and for a considerable time he gives thanks [the word used by Justin here is the word we translate as 'Eucharist'] that we have been judged worthy of these gifts. When he has concluded the prayers and thanksgivings, all present give voice to an acclamation by saying: 'Amen'. When he who presides has given thanks and the people have responded, those whom we call deacons give to those present the 'eucharisted' bread, wine and water and take them to those who are absent'(1st Apologia 65-67).

Strengthened and nourished by the Eucharist, we will, as the Responsorial Psalm reminds us, be able to walk through 'the valley of darkness', for we are not alone. In today's Second Reading, Paul says: 'There is nothing I cannot master with the help of the One who gives me strength'.

The ending of the Gospel needs some explanation. The point Jesus is making is that it is not enough just to turn up at the Marriage Feast. It is an invitation to love. When we come we are committing ourselves to respond to his love and to bear the fruits of love in our lives. That is the meaning of wearing the marriage garment. Paul speaks of being clothed in Christ. As we all know, attending Mass is not just passively listening. We are called to cry out to God for mercy and forgiveness. We are challenged to listen to the word of Scripture and to let it change our lives, and we are called to offer ourselves along with Jesus to the Father, and then to take Jesus with us out to our homes and our work.