

Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

The invitation to take part in the Lord's banquet is a theme running through today's readings. Everything about the banquet is a source of delight, but admission requires a response. Isaiah paints a picture of rich and tasty food prepared for the guests, all washed down with fine wine. The psalmist tells of striking hospitality – God preparing a banquet for us as honoured guests. Paul thanks the Christians at Philippi for their generous hospitality, while Jesus exposes the insult and ingratitude of the invited guests to the king's wedding banquet.

Isaiah 25:6-10 These verses are part of Isaiah's apocalyptic vision of the defeat of evil and the joyous springtime that will follow for those who have remained faithful to the Lord. This vision portrays a time when the poor and downtrodden will be lifted up with a banquet of blessings and release from oppression.

It is easy to overlook the fact that Jesus came to bring justice and release to captives, sight to the blind and restoration for those who suffered at the hands of the rich and powerful. He did not come to bring religion, as most people understand religion. In fact, he spelt out his agenda in the synagogue at Nazareth when he was asked to comment on the day's reading (Luke 4:16-30). His words to the gathering presented the God of surprises whose reign represents a reverse of values in the world order. Mary alluded to this reversal in her *Magnificat* when, in the words of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10), she described her son's mission to raise up the poor and the marginalised and put the rich and proud in their place.

In Hebrew tradition this period of redemption and celebration will be marked with a banquet on the mountain, that is, the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, which is imagined as the seat of God's dominion. The poetry of prophetic writing describes this hill as a high mountain, in keeping with the exalted language of prophecy. It is here that heaven and earth will meet in the end time as God brings all things together.

Psalms 23 This familiar psalm can be summed up in the phrase, 'for you are with me.' Despite its frequent use at funerals, the song focuses more on how we live in relationship with God than on death itself. It rejoices in the fact that God-centred living brings deep peace and intimacy with the divine.

Given its Middle-Eastern background the green pastures near restful waters are images that evoke an ideal world of security, abundance and contentment under the care of the divine Shepherd. What is curious is that the idea of God being shepherd to an individual is rare. God as the shepherd of all Israel is familiar enough.

The singer's relationship with God goes deeper as he is entertained as a guest at the Lord's banquet. The desert banquet is laid out on a blanket (*shulkhán*) placed on the floor of the tent to prevent sand from spoiling the food. That God should show such profound desert hospitality to the guest is beyond amazing. Such an honour, such a sign of connection!

Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20 Paul is alluding here to reciprocity conventions that were current in his day. It is about giving and receiving, and Paul gently hints that he has been given enough and the Philippian community does not owe him anything further. This puts a stop to the reciprocity to-and-fro.

In his second letter to the Corinthians (11:23-28) he lists the hardships he had undergone during his mission of spreading the word across Greece and Asia Minor (Türkiye). He mentions imprisonment, beatings, shipwrecks, dangers while travelling, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, cold and exposure, but here he merely alludes to the fact that he has seen the worst and can face any difficulty.

The Philippian Christians had sent him money while he was in prison and that certainly endeared them to him. He acknowledges his connection with them and gives them assurance that God will reward their generosity.

Matthew 22:1-14 This is the familiar parable of the declined invitations to a royal wedding banquet. The fact that Jesus addressed it to the chief priests and elders of the people gives us a clue to the target and intention of the parable.

The shadow of an outraged king hovers over this parable. The king puts on a feast for his son's wedding. He has invited guests in advance and sends out his servants to tell the guests that the day has arrived. Huge preparations have been made and all is now ready. To the king's horror those invited have shamed him by not only declining the invitation, but they even attacked the king's servants and killed them. Their outrageous and inexplicable response is all the more offensive.

Here is another of those elements of extremism that Jesus often puts into his parables to add impact to the narrative and provoke emotional reactions in the listeners. We can imagine the chief priests and elders applauding the action of the king in destroying the murderers and burning their town – unless they saw themselves in the role of those who rudely spurned the king's invitation.

This is not an act of generosity on the king's part, but an action motivated by shame

The servants are now despatched to the crossroads to bring in everyone they could find so that the wedding hall might be filled. This is not an act of generosity on the king's part but is an action motivated by frustration and shame. The code of honour and shame was a pivotal value in Middle Eastern society in the time of Jesus. A person's whole wellbeing would depend on the degree of honour they enjoyed in their own eyes and in the eyes of their neighbours and associates.

People would avoid any activity or condition that would bring shame on them, and the king in this parable is not going to permit himself to suffer the shame and ridicule of having prepared a wedding feast with no one to be there. Jesus adds extra weight to the king's shame by mentioning that this was the wedding of his son and heir; the offensive insult of those who declined their invitations now becomes all the more intolerable.

Our wedding garment is the quality of life we lead as committed Christians

The astute listeners among the chief priests and elders may have recognised the 'dig' that Jesus was having. The Jewish people are God's invited guests but some of them, including their religious leaders, who should know better, are indifferent and have other priorities, putting themselves and their own interests first. They passed judgment on Jesus who was prepared to take meals with sinners and outcasts in Jewish society.

But it was precisely those at the bottom end of society that were admitted to the king's banquet. However, an open invitation does not mean there are no entrance requirements for admission to the divine banquet. The man in the parable who stood out because he did not have on a wedding garment was offering an insult by not following due protocol. Our wedding garment is the quality of life we lead as committed Christians. We will exclude ourselves by not conforming our lives to the attitudes and teachings of the Master.



There's no beauty without difference and diversity. Love unconditionally.

Rasheed Ongularu (London-based motivational speaker)



My friend was trying to write a drinking song but he couldn't get past the first few bars.

What do you do when you see a space man?

You park in it, man.

Laurie Woods