

Homily – 28th Sunday in Ord. Time, Year A
St. Monica's – October 11/12, 2014
Thanksgiving / Synod on the Family

Isaiah 25:6-10: A banquet of rich food and well-aged wines, death destroyed forever: the promised Reign of God. Give thanks!

Psalms 23: “You prepare me a banquet ... I shall live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.

Philippians 4:10-14,19-20 “I have learned to be content with whatever I have, well-fed or hungry ... I can do all things through God who strengthens me ... My God will fully satisfy every need.”

Matthew 22:1-14 The parable of the wedding-banquet: generosity and urgency of the invitation. Go out and invite all, both good and bad. The missing garment: “many are called, few are chosen.”

A THANKSGIVING STORY: *One day, Fred and John were walking across a field. Fred turned around and saw that a bull was running straight toward them, so they both started running as fast as they could. But no matter how fast they ran, the bull was gaining on them. Knowing that Fred was a religious man, John yelled out, “There’s no way we can outrun this bull. Quick – say a prayer!” Fred responded, “The only prayer I can remember right now is the one my mother taught us to say before meals at home: ‘For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful. Amen!’”*

As we celebrate Thanksgiving this weekend, our readings speak to us of banquets and feasts. In the first reading, we hear Isaiah’s promise of “a feast of rich food and well-aged wines” for all peoples. The Psalmist describes God as a Good Shepherd who leads us to abundant pastures, who prepares for us a table of plenty, cups overflowing. Finally, in the Gospel, Jesus tells a parable of guests invited to a royal wedding-feast where the prime rib is ready for carving! Very fitting readings for Thanksgiving, a weekend in which many of us will go home to turkey or ham, to pumpkin pie or apple crisp, to whatever special food and drink we happen to enjoy for a feast with family and friends.

Whatever that might be, most of us will have the privilege of being able to sit down at a table of plenty. And yet, we know that not all will sit down this weekend to a bountiful table, surrounded by family and friends: those who are sick in hospital, those who are lonely and isolated, the poor, the grieving, the homeless.

For what will they give thanks this year? And how are we being called to reach out to them? Many of you have already reached out, have given money or brought in food to support our Thanksgiving food drive. Perhaps some of you have made an extra effort this year to invite to your Thanksgiving dinner a relative or neighbor who otherwise would find themselves alone. Perhaps you are offering up prayers or sending a gift to support our brothers and sisters in the Middle East whose lives are endangered for professing the faith they share with us.

Just as there is more to the spirit of Thanksgiving than the bounty on our tables, there is much more to these texts today than a celebration of rich food and well-aged wines. They provide us with real food for thought – solid food, to sustain our spiritual health.

For the fourth straight week, Matthew presents us with a parable intended to help us prepare for the coming Kingdom of God. The story is familiar: people who are too busy going about their daily occupations to attend a wedding-feast to which they have been specially invited, end up losing their places to the poor from the highways and byways. In Luke's version, it ends here: a hall filled with delighted guests, experiencing God's abundant bounty.

Matthew's version, which we hear today, is considerably darker. It foretells a violent end for those who reject the King's invitation. It also adds on this strange reference to a guest caught without a "wedding garment" who gets thrown out of the party into "the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth." So much for the happy ending!!!

You may well be wondering: what's going on here? The message of the first part of the parable is quite clear. God has called us to something important, challenging, beautiful, life-giving. So not surprisingly, God expects us to show up! With our busy lives, we can come up with all kinds of excuses – family responsibilities, business commitments, aches and pains, other attachments – for not heeding and answering God's invitation. But for Jesus, the Kingdom of God is THE most important thing. It is the reality against which everything else needs to be measured. Excuses are not justifications. If we refuse to answer the call, we should not be surprised when those who do respond more positively to God's invitation find their way in ahead of us.

This week, as Pope Francis gathers with cardinals and bishops and theologians and married couples for the Synod on the Pastoral Care of the Family, we as a Church are recognizing marriage and family life as a place where the call to holiness is being lived out, though often in difficult and painful circumstances. And it has been beautiful to see – dare I say for a change! – how the bishops are being invited to listen, to really *hear* the witness of the couples speaking of the challenges they are facing in marriage and family life, challenges as varied as integrating sexuality as an essential part of marital spirituality, as dealing with the pain of a failed marriage, as finding ways to ensure that their gay and lesbian children experience not judgment, but loving acceptance.

This Synod will not provide us with final and definitive answers to all these questions, but we can be grateful that Pope Francis has initiated a conversation on these topics that will help the church to grow in understanding of the mystery of divine and human love which is at the heart of our theology of marriage and the family.

This brings us to the significance of the guest found to be without a wedding-garment. It's not a question of poverty, or a fashion *faux pas*! At such a banquet, unexpected guests would have been provided with a special garment – in the same way that some upscale restaurants provide suit jackets and ties to men who show up without one. This guest received the garment, but immediately removed it and refused to wear it. This reminds us that although we have received this wonderful and totally undeserved invitation, it's not enough to just show up to the party. We need to come prepared. With some gift to offer, with some evidence that we have taken God's invitation seriously and are grateful for it.

After all, this is a wedding feast! So what is this mysterious "wedding garment" that each of us – rich or poor, man or woman, married or single – has been invited to put on? St. Paul expresses this thought beautifully in a text that many couples choose for their wedding Mass: ***“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, you must clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, patience, and forgiveness, bearing with one another lovingly. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony, and the peace of Christ will rule in your hearts. Always be thankful.”*** (Colossians 3:12-15)

Compassion – Forgiveness – Kindness – Gratitude: this is the one-size-fits-all wedding garment given to us by God in Christ. God expects us to wear it. If we are to truly enjoy and feel at home in the banquet that is the Kingdom of God, we are called to strip off the outer layer of envy, discord, jealousy, greed, lust, pride, indifference – and the compulsive busyness that blocks us from accepting Jesus’ invitation to life – and put on the garment of love and thanksgiving.

In today’s second reading, St. Paul is writing from prison to his beloved community at Philippi. He is sad to be away from them, and yet he tells them that he has learned to be content with whatever he has – hungry or well-fed, having plenty or being in need, in the company of friends or alone in his prison cell. The “secret” behind Paul’s happiness is his grateful spirit, his firm conviction: **“I can do all things through the One who strengthens me.”** Though grateful for all the external blessings, Paul knew that if he let his happiness depend on any one of these, or even on the sum of them, he could easily be disappointed. It is his relationship with Christ, his firm conviction that his life now belongs to Jesus *“who loved me and gave himself for me”*, that allowed him to choose joy and gratitude, even when times were hard. And so too can it be for us.

All of us are invited to the wedding-feast; each one of us is called to share in this spirit of gratefulness.” So for all that we have already received, for all that we will receive in the future, and for all that is in our lives here and now – for all this, may the Lord make us truly thankful. Happy Thanksgiving!

P.S.: I will be leaving this coming Wednesday on a two-week pilgrimage following in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul. Leading a group of two dozen pilgrims, we will visit many of the special places associated with Paul’s apostolic journeys – Ephesus, Thessalonica, Philippi, Athens, Corinth – and will be seeking together a deeper union with Christ, who was everything to Paul. Please pray for us, and know that your intentions and those of St. Monica’s Parish will be prominent in our prayers. One more thing for which to be thankful!

