

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to king who gave a wedding feast for his son.”

When was the last time you were at a banquet? Probably more than seven months ago. The banquet industry has suffered greatly due to the health restrictions imposed to limit the spread of the coronavirus. Banquets and dinning with others in less formal settings, are an important part of our social interactions as human beings. We have lunch with a friend, dinner with larger groups of family and friends. We have banquets to commemorate important life events; confirmations, graduations and weddings. Banquets are important in our interactions as Christians. We like to have coffee and cake after church and potluck suppers.

Holy Communion is a banquet. Although the fare may appear meagre in comparison to the quantity of food and drink provided at a wedding banquet, (a wafer of bread and a sip wine) the spiritual sustenance is of eternal value; forgiveness of sin, the blessing of the Holy Spirit and the promise of resurrection to everlasting life in God’s heavenly kingdom. As well as spiritual nourishment, the sip of wine and wafer of bread are a foretaste of the most lavish banquet, which God will prepare when we feast with Him in His kingdom at the return of Christ Jesus. God invites us to that feast, by calling us to faith in Jesus as our Lord and Saviour.

Have you ever turned down an invitation to a banquet? Probably we all have for one reason or another. Perhaps we had a prior engagement and had to RSVP our regrets. Perhaps we accepted the invitation and something of a more compelling nature came up at the last minute and we were unable to attend. Maybe we just didn’t want to go, because we didn’t want to see some of the other invited guests. There are many reasons for declining an invitation to a banquet or failing to attend, but there is one banquet we wouldn’t want to miss for all the tea in China. That’s the banquet to which Jesus refers in His parable and of which Isaiah sings in our lesson from the Old Testament.

We wouldn’t want to miss it, because it will be the greatest banquet in terms of its food and drink. Isaiah says, “the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well aged wine.” It will be the greatest banquet in terms of the reason for celebration. The Lord God will swallow up death forever and “wipe away tears from all faces.” It will be the banquet celebrating the death of death, the resurrection of believers in Christ Jesus and the inauguration of eternal life in God’s kingdom. Christ calls us to this banquet through the gospel, inviting us to receive Him as Saviour. All who respond in faith and believe in His holy name, have a place reserved at the heavenly Father’s table.

Banquets and feasts are important in our lives as humans and in our interactions as family, friends and members of the same community. We have dinners to mark birthdays, anniversaries and personal achievements. Our nation sets aside the second Monday in October as a harvest celebration. We hold Thanksgiving gatherings to remember the blessings we receive through the earth, to give thanks for the harvest and to seek God’s continued blessing through the fruitfulness of the earth.

Banquets and feasts are also important in terms of our relationship with God and our relationships with each other as believers in Christ. Coffee, cake and potluck suppers are important fellowship events, but the most important communal banquet is Holy Communion! Jesus gave this sacred meal as a means of spiritual refreshment and nourishment, through which we receive again the forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit. He gave it as a fellowship meal for believers to express the faith we share. He gave it also as a foretaste of the greatest feast come.

God loves feasts too! When God made covenant with Israel through Moses at Mount Sinai, He invited the elders of Israel to dine in His presence on the mountain. Exodus chapter twenty-four says, “Then Moses, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel...they beheld God and they ate and drank.” When God invited these men to eat and drink in His presence, can you imagine anyone refusing, because he had something better to do or because he didn’t like some of the other elders? But, that’s exactly what happened in Jesus’ parable. Many who were called declined the gracious invitation, some with abuse and violence. Jesus’ point is that there is nothing more important than feasting in the presence of God in His banquet hall. There is nothing more urgent than the gospel call, by which God invites us into His presence through faith in Jesus as Saviour!

The image of God's banquet runs through scripture from Exodus to Isaiah and through the gospels. It reaches its zenith in Revelation, in the wedding banquet of Christ and the Church. Passover in the Old Testament and Holy Communion in the New Testament are smaller feasts to nourish and refresh us on the way. The great feast is the marriage banquet of Christ and the Church. In Revelation chapter nineteen an angel tells John, "Write this: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.'" There is nothing more important than the invitation to the marriage supper of the Lamb. It is the beginning of forever, the renewal of all things in a new creation in which sin and sorrow, death and mourning are forever gone.

God calls us and all people to this great supper through the gospel, spoken by the voice of the church. The Church's purpose and our work as believers, is to invite people to the banquet through faith in Jesus. In Matthew chapter twenty-eight Jesus commissioned the church to this task, saying: "Go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you." We received this invitation when someone first shared the gospel of God's grace in Jesus with us. Do you remember who first shared the gospel of God's love in Christ with you? Maybe it was your mom or dad, or a Sunday School teacher. Perhaps it was a friend, or a believing stranger. Maybe you even heard it in church! There was a first time, but that wasn't the only time! God calls repeatedly, over and over again. He calls continuously through the voice of believers. Every time you hear the gospel message, God is inviting you to His banquet by calling you to faith in Jesus.

Have you ever received an invitation to a wedding, put the card on a shelf and forgot about it, only to find it after the event had taken place? Don't do that with God's invitation. His invitation is written for all of us in the words of scripture. St. John said in the second last chapter of his gospel, "These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God, that believing, you may have life in His Name." Don't let the invitation sit on the shelf, pick it up and read it! God has a place set aside and a chair turned up for you at His banquet table. He invites you to receive His grace in Christ through faith in His Name.

This is a little sensitive, but have you ever been thrown out of a banquet? You don't have to shout it out for everyone to know, just wink. There are people who crash wedding banquets and funeral luncheons; figuring that with the variety of families and friends present, no one will realize they are not connected to the bride or groom, or had any relationship with the deceased. The prospect of free food and the thrill of being somewhere without an invitation, are great temptations for some people. But of course, if you get found out, you will probably be shown the way out. Perhaps not as violently as the fellow in Jesus' parable, who was bound hand and foot and cast into the darkness. But depending on the families involved and their sense of violation, a trip into the dumpster might be on the menu. You could possibly see it for an insolent stranger, but an invited guest would have to engage in some very bad behaviour to be cast out of the hall.

Did the man in Jesus' parable deserve such harsh treatment? He wasn't a wedding crasher. He was an invited guest. The only thing against him was that he wasn't wearing a wedding garment. I've seen worse behaviour at wedding receptions and no one was ejected from the premises. But Jesus wasn't talking about an earthly banquet. He was speaking about God's righteous reign and what is necessary for us to enter into His banquet hall and stand in His presence. The one thing that is needed to stand in God's presence and take our place at the marriage feast of Christ and the Church, is the garment of His righteousness; received through faith in His name and put on by baptism into His death and resurrection. As Paul said to the jailer in Philippi, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved."

In Jesus' parable some refused the invitation, some despised it, others set it on the shelf. The man without the wedding garment, represents those who seek another way into God's presence than through the garment of Jesus' righteousness that covers our sin. We enter into the Father's presence for the sake of Jesus' righteousness, received through faith, put on by baptism into His death and resurrection! Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me." Jesus wants us to take a seat at the banquet table in His Father's house, when He returns as King and Lord of all. Jesus wants to cover our sin with the garment of His righteousness. We receive the garment of His righteousness through faith in His Name. We are clothed in His righteousness through baptism in His Holy Name!

Jesus invites us through the gospel. He says, "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest." He calls us to Himself that He may bring us into the Father's presence, forgiven and at peace with Him. He brings us into the Father's presence now through faith, fully and forever through His resurrection on the last day. All who receive Him through faith, receive the garment of His righteousness in forgiveness and a

reserved seat at the greatest banquet; the marriage feast of Christ and the Church; the feast celebrating His victory over sin and death; the feast celebrating the renewal of all things. God who has called us through the gospel and given us faith to believe and clothed us with the garment of Christ's righteousness, keep us in His grace to that day. In Jesus' Name.