

Pentecost 20 / October 15, 2023

Isaiah 25:8

“He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces.”

The Lord will swallow up death forever

Our gospel and our lesson from Isaiah are both set in banquets. The gospel, a wedding banquet and the lesson from Isaiah, a feast celebrating the death of death. Communal eating and drinking are important, both in our relationships with people and in our relationship with God. In Genesis the Lord visits Abraham under human form with two angels. Abraham invites them to eat with him. The Lord accepts his invitation. The Lord and Abraham showed respect for each other by sharing a meal. In our gospel a king sends servants to invite his subjects to the wedding feast of his son. They are too busy. All refuse to come. The king responds by sending his troops to burn their city and destroy them. Sounds like a harsh response. But in the ancient world, to refuse the invitation of your sovereign was an unforgivable expression of contempt. God our Sovereign, calls us to Himself in His Son that we may have life. To refuse His call is to dishonour Him and His Son.

When the subjects refuse to attend the king's banquet, he instructs his servants to go to the main roads and invite as many as they find. The hall is filled, but when the king arrives he finds a man without a wedding garment. When questioned as to how he came without proper attire, the man is speechless. The king orders his servants to cast the man out of the banquet hall. Jesus concludes, “For many are called, but few are chosen.” The king's anger at those who snubbed his invitation is understandable, but what of this man who responded to the invitation, but still gets hooped out of the hall? This man didn't despise the invitation as did the others, but nonetheless, he despised the king by coming to the banquet on his own terms. There was a dress code for wedding banquets. Suitable attire was required, but it would also have been provided. This man refused the wedding garment and chose to wear his own. This also was a sign of defiance against the king.

God calls us to Himself in Christ, to chose our own spiritual attire is to refuse the garment He gives us in Christ Jesus. In baptism God provides us with the garment necessary to meet the dress code; the garment of Jesus' blood and righteousness to cover our sins. He calls us as we are, so that He may exchange the rags of our unrighteousness with the garment of Christ's righteousness that covers our sinfulness. God invites all to come to Him through faith in Christ in repentance of sin that He may clothe us in Jesus' righteousness. All who receive Christ and the righteousness He gives have a place prepared at the greatest banquet, celebrating the death of death and the inauguration of eternal life. In Christ, God calls us to come.

God has prepared a great feast to celebrate the death of death and the inauguration of eternal life. He calls us to come at no cost to ourselves. He has paid the cost. The banquet was prepared at the greatest cost; the life, suffering and death of His eternal Son. The invitation to the banquet is extended for all to receive through faith in Christ. To refuse the invitation is to despise the offering of God in the sacrifice of Christ. To refuse Christ is to refuse the wedding garment of His righteousness that covers our sins. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Only He brings us to the Father in peace. He brings us to the Father through the blood of His sacrifice which covers our sins. He calls us to come. He receives us through faith. He washes and clothes us with His righteousness in our baptism into His death and resurrection. He nourishes our faith and gives us a foretaste of the feast to come in the bread and wine of His Holy Communion. He calls all to receive Him. The Father receives all who receive Him.

The invitation is offered for all to receive. All who receive the invitation receive the covering of Jesus' righteousness as the garment by which they enter into the banquet hall. To seek another way is to refuse the garment of Christ's righteousness and to despise the sacrifice of His cross. The way to God is not like a wheel with many spokes leading to the center. There is one way to God, through Christ Jesus. He is the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Him. All who come to Him in faith, He brings to the Father in peace. As St. Paul said in the letter to the Ephesians, through Christ all people have access to God by the Holy Spirit. There is only one way, Jesus our righteousness. There is only one way, but the way is open for all and offered for all to receive through faith in Christ Jesus. God has prepared a banquet of life through the sacrifice of Christ, the finest of meats, the choicest of wine. God invites us to the feast in the gospel of forgiveness through faith in Jesus. To all who receive Christ through faith, God promises a place in His banquet hall at the feast of life, when He swallows up death forever and wipes the tears from all faces. In Christ, God calls us to come.

The banquet in our lesson from Isaiah is a funeral banquet, but of quite a different kind. We have probably all been to luncheons after funerals. It is common practice for people to have a communal meal following the funeral of a loved one; even if its simply sandwiches, cake and cookies. Eating together makes good times better and sad times less sorrowful. A funeral luncheon may not be a banquet, but it is a communal meal. It is a time to share memories and console one another in our shared grief at the loss of a loved one. We share stories, laugh and remember better times. We are reunited with people we haven't seen since the last funeral luncheon. There is happiness with the tears, but we would be happier if the guest of honour were with us. Then there would be no tears.

The banquet in our lesson is a communal meal at a funeral of sorts. It is a funeral for death. The only tears shed at this banquet will be tears of joy. There will be a great reunion of believers in Christ from every time and place. Death swallows everyone, but at this banquet death will be swallowed up and the dead in Christ will be returned to life. Christ swallowed up death through the sacrifice of His cross on Mount Calvary. Through death He defeated death. In His resurrection He offers forgiveness and eternal life for all to receive. He calls us to come to God through faith in Him. He promises forgiveness in time and life in eternity. He promises a place at the banquet celebrating the last funeral, the death of death, and a place in His resurrection to life everlasting.

Looking forward to the time of Christ and the sacrifice of His cross on Mount Calvary, Isaiah writes, "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well aged wine...He will swallow on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples...He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces." Already Christ has defeated death. In Revelation He appeared to St. John in glory, holding the keys of death and hades. Already Christ has swallowed up death in the lives of those who believe and have been baptized into His death and resurrection. Those who are alive, live in Him. Those who die, rest in Him rest in Him. He will swallow death up fully and forever, when He calls us to rise from our graves and take our place at the banquet of everlasting life.

Today Christ gives us a foretaste of that great feast in the supper of His holy body and precious blood in the bread and wine of communion. Today Christ calls us to come to Him in faith through the word and by the working of the Holy Spirit. Today Christ gives us forgiveness in our sins, strength in our weakness, consolation in our grief, a real and living hope in all things. On the day of His return Christ will give us more. He will call us to rise in His resurrection and take our place at the greatest feast in the house of the heavenly Father. He will give us the finest of meats and the best of wines to celebrate the death of death and the inauguration of eternal life. God in His mercy, bless us with His grace and bring us to that time of eternal joy and that place of unspeakable celebration. In Jesus' Name. Amen.