

The 28th Sunday in the Year of Matthew

This week I have been at Douai Abbey near Reading for the diocesan clergy retreat. On Friday morning I went to the magnificent Abbey Church where three young monks were sweeping the vast stone floor ready for the weekend. The beautiful white stone reminded me of Herod's Temple in Jerusalem which is where Jesus is teaching and telling his audience about the invitation to the wedding feast which we here today from Matthew.

Jesus' listeners would have been horrified and scandalized that Jesus was telling this story at all and especially in the Temple, the heart and core of Israel's distinct identity. The wedding feast, which Isaiah describes as well, is the ancient image which Israel and Jesus used to describe what will happen to creation and human beings when God comes to heal and transform it all with his love and presence. That everything created would one day be glorified and restored has been a fundamental human hope from the beginning and today Jesus uses the image of the wedding feast to describe it.

But back to the white stoned Temple and the horror and panic Jesus would have most certainly caused because Jesus' audience would have seen very quickly that the story was aimed at them and did not put them in the best of religious lights. In fact, immediately after this passage, the Pharisees are so angry and threatened that they began a plot to trap Jesus in something he might say. Jesus caused horror and panic because in the story, those invited rejected the invitation and worse, turned on the messengers and treated them with violence. And it got worse. Following the violent rejection, the servants were told to go to the crossroads and invite everyone they could find. This would have been the final straw. Those listening to Jesus considered themselves to be an exclusive group who accepted God's invitation faithfully. Not only that. They were on the inside of the group that God had chosen and everyone was outside, especially the ones that Jesus sent the servants to collect. Their identity was not to be watered down and they were seriously threatened by Jesus saying that salvation was for all people and not just for them.

That the message and promise of Jesus is for all people is certain and fundamental to our faith – everyone is invited to the wedding feast – if everyone rejects Jesus' invitation and promise it is not because of the message. Everything that Jesus says and does is inherently attractive to every human being because we were created to hear it and enter into relationship with him. If it is rejected it could be for two reasons. Either because of the power of sin which blinds us to the truth of Jesus or because the servants or messengers are not presenting the good news of Jesus appropriately.

The whole of the parable of the wedding feast is about us who have accepted the task of being servants of the message of Jesus and it leaves us with the question about how we are to be effective in our task.

We are not to be like the unfortunate man in today's gospel, who having been brought in from the crossroads is thrown out because he is not wearing a wedding garment. Like everything else in the parable, the wedding garment has a deeper meaning, which is relevant to us and which we must explore.

If we are to be effective as Christians, if we are to be holy and close to God, if our lives are to radiate the living and dynamic life and spirit of Christ, we are to 'put on' the image and love of Christ as one puts on a garment.

St. Paul gives us the starting point in his letter to the Philippians which we heard today. He speaks of his initiation, by which he means his closeness to Jesus and his conviction that Jesus is risen into his life. For Paul and for all of us, the moment of Baptism and the beginning of our relationship with Jesus is absolutely crucial if we are to be effective in our Christian life and fulfilled human beings. It is for each of us to see that Jesus is a living person who shares our life. Each day bring opportunities to recognize where Jesus has been working in the details of life' in the joys, the sorrows and especially the relationships. That is why it is important for us to bring everything that happens to us each day to prayer and ask the Lord to help see what he is doing and where he is leading us.

This connection with Jesus which is real for all of us, and which can become more and more a conscious reality, will lead us to that indispensable part of being a follower of Christ which is to hand over our needs to the one who gives us strength. We call this repentance and it requires us to recognize those parts of our experience where we prefer to manage without God or even do things not in accord with his love for us. "There is nothing I cannot master with the help of the one who gives me strength" says St. Paul and it means that we must entrust to the Lord all those areas of life where we need extra strength or help. All those things indicated by joy or sorrow in relationship, in fear and anxiety, in poverty or illness.

Those two vital truths, our eagerness to enter more deeply into our relationship with Jesus and our willingness to change and entrust our cares and weakness to him, will transform us so that we are seen to be clothed in Christ himself. Then, as his servants and messengers, we will be effective and successful in inviting others to the wedding feast. We will be playing our part in bringing humanity to Christ for its renewal, transformation and healing.