

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Feasts and banquets are all over our readings this morning. I think it's hard to exaggerate how important these kinds of events were to the ancient cultures in which the biblical texts were written. And that is certainly why they serve as one of the central images of the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments. Feasts and banquets were certainly not common events. For most people they would have been few and far between, and they would have been held only to celebrate special occasions, like weddings. I think things are different for us. Helen and I have been watching a BBC series called *This Farming Life*. It is set in the north of England and Scotland and follows six different small farming families. The other night we watched an episode in which one of the families had had a particularly successful day of buying new cattle at the market. At the end of the day, the husband, speaking to the camera, says, "Maybe we'll celebrate by getting a carry out this evening." In normal times, I don't think I would have given that comment a second thought, but since we're not in normal times, it occurred to me that Helen and I do the same thing. Where normally we would go out to a restaurant to celebrate, say, an anniversary, or sometimes just the end of a long hard week, these days we celebrate with takeout. We have been intentional, though, about patronizing our local establishments during the shutdown so they won't go away permanently, so our takeout orders are not always connected with celebrating.

In more normal times, we still have feasts in our culture, although we would call them parties, or dinner parties, or receptions if it's a wedding. Thanksgiving is the big annual one for most of us, together with Christmas as maybe a close second. But special occasion feasts are the really big ones: weddings, of course, and then the big wedding anniversaries – 25<sup>th</sup>, 40<sup>th</sup>, 50<sup>th</sup>. For my parents' 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary they rented a big tent and set it up in the next-door neighbors' yard. They invited all their friends and church family and had the food catered in. And then, at the end of the festivities, there was a surprise. My father announced that my sister and her partner would be getting married, right then and there. This was a surprise to my mother too. This was the second marriage for both of them, and they didn't want a big elaborate wedding of their own. It was the perfect ending to that family celebration, and keeping it a secret meant we could fully focus on each celebration separately. Plus, we got extra cake in the bargain.

So feasts are still a part of our culture. In normal times, we still gather around food and drink with the people who are important to us. They serve to strengthen relationships among friends and within families. And that, I think, is our connection to the feasts and banquets of ancient times and their use as an image of what God's kingdom – God's reign – looks like.

I'm going to focus on the banquet in our Gospel reading this morning and try to connect that to our reality. And for that we need to do just a little more work. The banquet in this reading is not just any banquet. It is a banquet given by a king for his subjects. I struggle to find an equivalent for us. When's the last time you attended a banquet given by a king? Maybe an office Christmas party would be a very distant approximation. If you've ever worked for a company or an institution that throws Christmas parties, you know that you're kind of expected to be there, whether you want to or not. It's a way of building community and camaraderie among your work cohort. It's good "office politics" to attend.

This is an important factor in this royal wedding banquet, too. This is not just any party. It's a party given by someone whom the invited guests owe allegiance and loyalty. To attend, or not attend – these are political decisions, and all the more so because this is a banquet in honor of the king's son and heir – his political successor. Refusing the invitation would be seen as disloyalty,

and killing the messengers would be unmistakable as outright rebellion, a clear sign that they want to be their own king. That accounts for the king's reaction in sending his army to kill the rebels and destroy their city. It seems harsh to our modern sensibilities, but it would strike the original audience as a normal, expected reaction.

In the context of Matthew's Gospel, and following up on last week's parable of the vineyard tenants who kill the son and heir of the vineyard owner, this is clearly about the religious establishment of Jesus' time who have proven to be unfaithful and self-serving, and who – as we know – will end up killing Jesus. What we have to be very careful about, though, is how we apply this. There is a long history of Christians using this and similar passages to say that this is about the Jewish people rejecting God, and concluding that God therefore rejects them. Don't go there, dear people. That's the strategy of blaming others for the problems we are complicit in, which is all too common these days in our politics, as you might have noticed. In our context this would be better applied to lifelong Christians who use our religion as a cover for our own agendas, to confirm our prejudices and bless our selfishness. For this parable to work for us, we have to see ourselves as those who fail to take God's invitation to us seriously and insist on keep ourselves and our interests at the center of our lives.

Then there is the fellow who shows up without the wedding gown. Without going into the cultural expectations here, both in ancient and modern times, suffice it to say that he is really just the opposite side of the same coin. Not originally on the guest list, he now has the honor of being invited to the feast. In Matthew's context, this would represent the Gentiles, the non-Jewish population among whom early Christianity quickly spread. I'm so glad he shows up in this parable, because he helps to make clear that this is not really about Jews and Gentiles as such. Jews aren't uniformly condemned here, and Gentiles do not get a free pass. Just like the A-list crowd, this fellow on the B-list is in it for himself. He is happy to gorge himself on a free meal, but he doesn't care about the king or the other guests. This guy is also us.

So once again this week we have a parable that has very little good news in it. Many are called, few are chosen. And all of the main characters in this story, aside from the king, end up outside of the banquet – in the outer darkness, as the text says. But we need to linger here a little while, so that the good news that Matthew is driving toward in the coming chapters can sink in. Whether we are the rebellious A-listers, or the ungrateful B-listers, or whether we are a combination of both – the whole coin, as it were – the good news that is coming is that God continues to be merciful, even to us in the outer darkness. We saw in the last parable how the son and heir of the vineyard owner was taken out of the vineyard and killed, and how this was an allusion to Jesus' crucifixion. The good news of Matthew's gospel is that God is with us and for us even in the outer darkness by the death of Jesus Christ. That is reassuring news to me in these dark days of coronavirus pandemic, official incompetence and corruption, and social and political disfunction, all of which we have brought upon ourselves. The future for our country, our economy, and our society seems bleak. And it just might all come crashing down on us.

But in Jesus Christ there is a glimmer of hope. In him God has come among us as one of us, to suffer alongside of us, to endure humiliation, pain, and death with us. But because he is *God-with-us*, the outer darkness will not be the end of his story, or ours. Bear that in mind, beloved people of God, even as the pandemic heats up again, as the political shenanigans continue, and who knows what's in store for us over the next month and beyond. God is with us in Jesus Christ. The darkness will not contain him, and death will not hold him. Because of his resurrection there light and life to come, for him, for you, and for me, and a banquet at which we will celebrate, and delight in God and in one another. Hold tight to that vision and that promise. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.