

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Banquets are all over the place in our readings today, everywhere but our second reading.

Banquets are the ultimate parties, the celebrations of the most important times of our lives – weddings are probably the biggest of these in our personal lives, followed by birthdays, anniversaries, maybe baptisms and confirmation in our tradition. But you could think of national holidays as collective banquets, particularly Independence Day on the Fourth of July, and Thanksgiving, at least as it used to be celebrated. But aside from the particulars, banquets or feasts are universal across cultures and nations. So it's no surprise that banquets feature in the Bible as visions of the good future that God promises God's people, and it's no accident that we reflect that in our liturgy during the Easter Season when we sing This is the Feast of Victory for our God. What could be better as a final chapter to God's good creation than a feast that has no end?

I'm going to have quick look at most of our readings this morning, first with regard to the banquets, but finally with how we prepare for the one that is coming. These texts, taken together and viewed in the overall context of the Bible, can serve as a hopeful response both to the bleakness of these recent readings from Matthew's Gospel that we have been making our way through, including today, but also to the discouraging state of affairs that confront us in the news and in our personal lives. They also present us with a challenge to what we might be hoping for, and an offer of something even better.

First is our reading from Isaiah. This is a text we often hear toward the end of the church year. Next year the second half will be one of the readings for All Saints Sunday. It's also a text that is often chosen for funerals. It is a beautiful vision of good food and good drink celebrating God's victory over the powers of death and evil. Part of what makes the vision so compelling is that what it promises has to be waited for. Much time has to elapse before the final victory becomes a reality and God's people can be vindicated from the suffering and humiliation they have endured at the hands of their enemies. But there's one thing we don't notice about this text because we never read it to the end. We omit the final three verses of the chapter. And that's because it's a bit of a downer. It turns out that down below the mountain where this lush banquet has been spread, are the traditional enemies of Israel, the Moabites. And they are getting what's coming to them, trodden down in a dung pit, unable to keep themselves from sinking into it. The Israelites in Isaiah's imagining cannot fathom a good ending for themselves that does not include a bad ending for their enemies. I'll come back to this later with a surprise about how we might tie this to the banquet in our Gospel reading.

But first, I want to mention Psalm 23 in passing, surely the favorite of all the psalms and also, like the Isaiah text, often chosen at funerals. It, too, confidently gives us a comforting and hopeful vision of God's faithfulness and care for us. But also like the Isaiah text, it seemingly cannot dispense with a mention of enemies. The banquet that God lays out for us there is done in the presence of our enemies. We get to feast, they get to watch, and presumably go hungry, getting their payback for the terrible things they have done to us.

Payback continues in the Gospel reading. The king in Jesus' parable puts on a wedding banquet for his son, but his invited guests refuse to come. In fact they mistreat his messengers, and even kill some of them. And so he sends his soldiers to destroy their cities. It would be a shocking and disturbing text that we might be tempted quickly to dismiss as over the top if it didn't parallel current events so tragically well. If you've been paying attention to the news, you will know that a week ago Hamas militants from Gaza massacred many hundreds of Israelis and took others

hostage. Israel is now responding with deadly and destructive force in Gaza. This is a very complicated and difficult situation with a long and bloody history. Our presiding bishop wrote a public letter strongly condemning the initial attack, but also reminding us of the innocent Palestinian lives that are lost when war breaks out in such a densely populated area. My only point in bringing this up is to make the case that payback remains as prevalent in our day as it ever was. And in this story of Jesus it happens twice, first with the rebellious invitees, but second with the wedding guest called in later who neglected to take the occasion seriously by not wearing the expected wedding clothes. So the king has him hogtied and thrown into the “outer darkness.”

This last part is a detail we easily could have edited off the end of our reading, like we have edited off the end of the Isaiah reading. Out with old, in with the new, let’s get this party started! But it’s a good thing we didn’t leave it out, because it sets up the surprise that both of these readings make possible in the long arc of Scripture. I’ll start with this Matthew text. Jesus’ parable here is meant to draw in its hearers and show them uncomfortable truths about themselves. Like last week’s parable this first part is about the religious elites of the Jewish people. But the last part is not about them. It is directed at the church in Matthew’s time that is reaching out to the non-Jewish world, the Gentiles. And they don’t get a free pass on their behavior just because they are Gentiles. Unfortunately, the church has not always noticed this, and we too have played the payback game, as if the religious leaders’ opposition to Jesus was an ethnic trait that condemns a whole people, rather than a human thing that reveals the truth of Paul’s famous assertion in Romans that *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. So if you can’t see yourself in the original guests that end up outside of the party, maybe you’ll see yourself in the selfish and ungrateful B-list guest who was just looking for a free meal, and who also finds himself in the outer darkness.

Well, here comes the surprise for those who find themselves in the outer darkness, the places of weeping and rage: It is precisely in this outer darkness that Jesus is to be found. It’s where Matthew and all of the Gospels are leading us, to the lowest depths of human experience, outside the walls of the city to the place of carnage and crucifixion. And here comes surprise number two. Remember the Moabites I mentioned earlier, the enemies of Israel that we edited off the end of that beautiful banquet scene from Isaiah, swimming in excrement down at the bottom of the mountain while the party goes on up above? Well, Jesus is one of those Moabites. Remember Ruth, the faithful Moabite woman? She is one of Jesus’ ancestors, the great grandmother of King David. It’s one of the first things Matthew mentions way back in chapter one. Surprise! Jesus meets us in these marginal places of hopelessness and despair because God will not be satisfied with *our* vision of victories that revel in revenge and leave enemies suffering at the bottom of the hill or in the outer darkness. God’s vision of victory refuses to perpetuate the payback game, because that is a game that never ends, and God wants a different kind of ending for us. God comes among us as one of us in Jesus to suffer the consequences and collateral damage of our revenge games, to take upon himself the pain and suffering of the world so that he might undo them, so that he might rob sin, death, and evil of their ultimate power, and open for us a new and better future free from their grip.

There is going to be a lot of payback played out in the world at large, in our national politics, and in our personal lives in the days and weeks and years to come. Our only hope is in the surprising promise that God is at work in Jesus to break endless cycle and open up a new and better future for us and for all people. May we place our hope and our trust in that surprising promise. May God grant us courage by the power of the Holy Spirit to live into a new and better life and make us agents of hope for the world. And may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.