

Dinner Reservations

Matthew 21:45-22:15

October 9, 2011

I.

Remember when we were kids outside playing, and someone called from the house saying, "Dinner's ready, come on in." And perhaps we were in the middle of doing something else that was more fun, and so we stayed outside. This frequently produced another summons, "Get in here right now, food is on the table."

Susan certainly does not have that problem with me. She's more likely to say, "Stay out of the kitchen until it's ready."

And sometimes it isn't really about food, but rather a setting that incidentally involves food. Years ago when I worked in Washington I received an invitation to a dinner at the White House. My excitement was about going to the White House rather than the food on the menu.

And, of course, we can be interested in both. We join our friends at a restaurant to share fellowship and good times. But we also pick a place where we know the food will be good.

So, how does today's Gospel fit into that? It spoke of a great banquet, and said that the host's oxen and fat calves already had been prepared. Now, I grew up on a farm and ate a variety of things, but I don't think I ever ate an ox. Perhaps it was different in Jesus' time.

But even though banquet menus two thousand years might be unlike those of today, the banquet Jesus described in today's reading is timeless. The story applies to every moment of human history since biblical times. Let's look at it in a little more detail.

II.

But first I should digress and say that another version of this story is in Luke's Gospel with differences that skeptical theologians dwell upon. It is more likely, however, that Jesus told the same story more than once, and Matthew reported one occasion while Luke reported another.

After all, Jesus traveled around the countryside and preached for over two years, and he did not have new material every time. Please keep that in mind when doubters point out differences between similar events in different Gospels. Jesus simply repeated elements of his basic message at different times with different emphases. But the message itself did not change.

Now, to the Gospel. The first thing we notice is that parts of this story don't make sense, and don't seem to flow from real life. That causes some people say it is an allegory rather than a parable. But we're going to call it a parable because that is how most people regard the stories that Jesus told as ways to teach and make a point.

But there has to be a lot of symbolism here. It started as a wedding banquet but no one came. Even in the absence of guests, wouldn't there be friends and family of the bride and groom? Perhaps not, if the guests' absence has a deeper meaning.

And then the king got mad at those who were invited first but did not come, and sent out an army to destroy them and burn their city. How long did that take? Did the food get cold while it was going on? Again, it might not be relevant if the story does not describe a real situation.

After that the king produced a new guest list of everyone in town, whether they were good or bad, and they all filled the banquet hall as the banquet began.

But there is more. The king noticed one man who was not dressed properly. The Gospel says he was not wearing a wedding robe. I guess it was not a come as you are party. Or perhaps it might have been like wearing an LSU jersey to an Ole Miss pep rally.

And the king would not let the man remain. But note he was not just sent outside, or put back on the street, or told to go home. Instead, he was bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness, amidst weeping and gnashing of teeth. Wow! What does that mean? Was it an overreaction? Perhaps there's a hint in the next sentence. "Many are called but few are chosen."

III.

Today's reading paints a vivid picture of God's plans for humanity. It portrays God's desire for obedience, and the consequences of disobedience. Symbolically we see that the king is God, and the wedding banquet for his Son is the Last Judgment over which Jesus will preside.

The first group of guests invited to the banquet was from the past. They were the leaders of Israel who rejected Jesus and ignored the prophets' call to holiness. This disobedience had its origins in the story of golden calf we heard in our Old Testament reading today.

The second group of guests was from the future. They are the apostles and Jesus' followers who formed the church after the resurrection and continued through history to the present time. And we know that the church has not always put its best foot forward. That's why this second group included both the good and the bad.

Then the king arrives, a future event that represents Final Judgment. And as I mentioned earlier, the king notices someone not wearing wedding robes. This is the unfortunate fellow who was thrown into the outer darkness. And the reference here is not to literal robes, but rather the robes of Christ's righteousness fabricated from our faith. They are a perfect fit. God is the tailor.

But this fellow was not clothed in righteousness, even though he was at the banquet. This can depict those who have heard the message of salvation, and perhaps give it some lip service, but do not accept it in their hearts.

To use a contemporary analogy they might be what some people call tour bus Christians. They are on the scene, can see things out the window, and probably know something about what they are seeing. And they listen to some of the guide's explanations if it interests them.

But they stay on the bus and don't get off to explore on their own. They don't actually experience anything, and then go back to the priorities of their worldly lives when the tour is over. Perhaps they are among those called, but through their indifference are not chosen.

This can be a spiritually dangerous position in which to be. And we might not like to hear about it. Perhaps we might be concerned that people we know are in that position. Or else we don't want to believe that a loving God would not simply draw everyone to him.

But we cannot ignore the Bible. People might not believe the Bible, but they cannot say that it is silent on these matters. It says what it says. God offers his love through Jesus Christ, and if we accept that love as it is offered we can look forward to the banquet. But if we don't, then the last part of today's reading would come into play.

IV.

This last part is important because it gives us a peek at what the next life could be like for those who do not accept Jesus and what he has done for us. And here I will acknowledge in advance that some pretty smart people have differing ideas about heaven and hell.

And while most of us are happy with the idea of paradise in heaven, many of us don't want to accept the existence of that other place. It makes us nervous. We don't want to believe it. We search for every possible reason to explain it away or minimize it. I have done that.

But even if we treat the flames of the lake of fire in the Book of Revelation as apocalyptic symbolism, the Bible in other places still specifically mentions hell, and hades, and the abyss, and the pit, and the nether world in a variety of settings all related to an unpleasant afterlife.

Therefore, today's Gospel gives us a reason to briefly examine what that afterlife might be like, even though a more detailed discussion surely would require a separate sermon.

And we can start by setting aside medieval stereotypes of fire, flames, torment, and agony so vividly portrayed in the literature and art of those early times. Dante's *Inferno*, the first part of his fourteenth century epic poem, is a classic example, and it does not claim to be anything other than a fictional work. The Bible, however, including today's Gospel, gives us some better clues.

The prophet Isaiah proclaimed that sins produce separation from God (59:2). St. Paul made the same point to the Ephesian church (2:12). There are many other examples. And if sins separate people from God and they do not reconcile with God through Christ in this life, there is no reason to believe they will be with God in the next life.

Instead, they will inhabit the outer darkness Jesus referred to today, the destination of the man not clothed in Christ's righteousness. Jesus also spoke of the outer darkness in the same way elsewhere in the Gospel (Mt. 8:11-12, 25:29-30). And other parts of the Bible confirm that darkness characterizes the afterlife of those who do not believe (2 Pe. 2:4, Ju. 1:11-13).

And it appears that those in that outer darkness will, after it is too late, realize the error of their ways. That would explain references today and elsewhere in the Bible to weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt. 13:42-42, 24:50-51, Lk. 13:28). That reaction could be based in Scripture's explanation that rejection of our Lord brings shame and a sense of condemnation (Mk. 8:38, Jn 5:28-29, 2 Thess. 2:12, 1 Jn. 2:28).

Eternal separation from God. Realizing too late that Jesus truly offered salvation. Living eternally in the great shame of not taking that offer seriously. Knowing that those who did are forever in our Lord's embrace. Today's Gospel tells us those are the consequences of coming to the banquet not clothed in Christ's righteousness.

V.

Historians say that the modern microscope was invented in Holland in the seventeenth century. That gave rise to the story of the wealthy Chinese merchant who purchased one and took great delight in studying magnified crystals, flower petals, and so on.

One day he decided to look at magnified images of rice, the staple of his daily diet. To his great dismay he saw microscopically small living creatures crawling around in his rice. He enjoyed his rice, and this created a dilemma. He decided the only way out was to destroy the microscope, the instrument that caused him to discover this distasteful fact about rice.

"How foolish," we might say. "Destroying the microscope didn't change the rice." But many people do the same thing with the Word of God. They get rid of it because they don't like the truth it reveals. Wouldn't it be easier and more sensible to just accept the truth, especially since it gives us eternal nourishment.

And if we are nourished with the truth, then we will be welcome at that great banquet where God's grace and Christ's righteousness are featured on the menu. I pray that we all claim our seats at that heavenly table. *Amen.*