

Isaiah 25:6 On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

Gather us in, the lost and the lonely,
The broken and breaking,
The tired and the aching
Who long for the nourishment found at your feast.
Gather us in, the done and the doubting,
The wishing and wondering,
The puzzled and pondering
Who long for the company found at your feast.
Gather us in, the proud and pretentious,
The sure and superior, the never inferior,
Who long for the levelling found at your feast.
Gather us in, the bright and bustling,
The stirrers, the shakers, the kind laughter makers
Who long for the deeper joys found at your feast.

All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small,
All things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all.

Each little flower that opens, each little bird that sings,
He made their glowing colours, he made their tiny wings.
All things bright and beautiful.....

The purple-headed mountain, the river running by,
The sunset, and the morning that brightens up the sky.
All things bright and beautiful.....

The cold wind in the winter, the pleasant summer sun,
The ripe fruits in the garden, he made them every one.
All things bright and beautiful.....

He gave us eyes to see them, and lips that we might tell
How great is God Almighty, who has done all things well.
All things bright and beautiful.....

Matthew 22.1-10

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

Reflection

Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens,
bright copper kettles and warm woollen mittens,
brown paper packages tied up with strings,
these are a few of my favourite things.

Cream coloured ponies and crisp apple strudels,
door bells and sleigh bells and schnitzel with noodles.
Wild geese that fly with the moon on their wings.
these are a few of my favourite things.

Girls in white dresses with blue satin sashes,
snowflakes that stay on my nose and eyelashes,
silver white winters that melt into springs,
these are a few of my favourite things.

God has given us so many good things to enjoy!
Sitting in front of a log fire on a chilly evening
Watching the mist rise from the hills on an autumn morning
The flavours of a well cooked meal
Snuggling into a cosy bed
These are a few of my favourite things.

So I invite you, just for a few moments, to close your eyes and call to mind your own favourite things and give thanks.

God has given us so many good things to enjoy, even in the middle of a pandemic.

This parable of the wedding feast, in Matthew's gospel has often been seen as a parable about the kingdom of God. All are invited to be part of the kingdom of God but not everyone chooses to come. Twice the king sends his slaves out to the invited guests and twice they fail to come. And whereas tending one's farm or attending to one's business may seem like reasonable excuses for their failure to attend, mistreating and killing your slaves does not appear to fall within the umbrella of acceptable excuses. We presume that the King only killed this last group, rather than the ones going peaceably about their business.

God has given us so many good things to enjoy. God has prepared a feast for us, the feast of life, the party of life, if you like. But, like the invited guests in the parable, we have chosen to reject God's invitation to the party. We have destroyed the natural world

Some scary statistics

Climate change is expected to cause 250,000 deaths between 2030 and 2050. Sea levels are expected to rise 26 inches by the end of the century, "Humanity has wiped out 60% of mammals, birds, fish and reptiles since 1970, we are sleepwalking towards the edge of a cliff" said Mike Barrett, executive director of science and conservation at the World Wildlife Fund "If there was a 60% decline in the human population, that would be equivalent to emptying North America, South America, Africa, Europe, China and Oceania. That is the scale of what we have done".

We have failed to share the earth's riches, failed to allow, or encourage everyone to come to the party, like the King did when the invited guests failed to turn up. We create division and exclusion, the in crowd and the out crowd.

In a world where there is enough for everyone to eat around 690 million still go to sleep on an empty stomach.

Approximately 1.3 billion tons of all food in the world is wasted. These tons of food would be enough to feed four times all the hungry in the world. We routinely consume far more calories than we actually need.

For me, this parable makes clear that the party is for everyone. Many of us ignore the party, preferring to concentrate on the acquisition of wealth and material possessions. Others participate in a half hearted sort of way, giving up when the going gets rough and failing to see all of the good things God has given us. Probably all of us do that at some point. We exclude people from the party, denying them the right to food, water, and shelter. Who can party if they have no food or no shelter?

So, as God's children, let's party, even in the middle of a pandemic. Let's look out for the good things God has given us and let's make sure we try and share them in whatever way we can.

God has given us such good things to enjoy. How can we resist the invitation to the party?

Prayer of confession

Creator God, you have given us so many good things

We come to you in sorrow

at the many ways in which we have misused your creation;

for the times when we have used your gifts carelessly

or acted ungratefully;

for the times when we have enjoyed the fruits of your harvest,

and forgotten that you have given them to us.

We know that we belong to a people who are full and satisfied:

Forgive us when we ignore the cries of the hungry.

Forgive our thoughtlessness

when we do not care for the world that you have made;
when we store up goods for ourselves alone,
as if there were no God and no heaven.
Have mercy on us God, forgive us and help us.

Lord, hear our prayer, and change our lives
Until we illustrate the grace of the God who makes all things new.

Lord's Prayer

Matthew 22.11-14

"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."

Reflection

This second part of the reading caused me quite a few problems. I was tempted to cut the reading short at verse 10. But that would have been cheating. It seems very unfair to me that the man without wedding clothes was slung into the outer darkness, often interpreted as Hell. What if he couldn't afford party clothes? Or what if, because of the extremely short notice, he didn't have time to change?

This part of the parable has often been seen as an injunction to be ready for the second coming when it is said that Christ will return in all his glory, separate the sheep from the goats taking some with Him back to eternal glory and condemning some to eternal darkness. I have seen injunctions quite like this on Facebook. The end times are coming. Get ready!

I don't know about all of that. I would prefer to ascribe to the parable a much simpler, more easily believable meaning, a meaning

that I can do something with as I live out my life in these difficult times.

And the meaning I would take from it is this. God asks us to make an effort. It is not enough to simply sit back and enjoy the good things God has given us, sit back and wait for God to change the mess that we in the 20th and 21st century have made of the world. God needs us to make an effort. It's a two way thing.

Although it is said that God's grace should be enough for us, God wants us to be prepared to respond, to do our best to be up for partying.

One church I attended used symbolism in how it conducted Holy Communion. So we took the bread out to people, as a symbol of Christ coming to us where we are, and people moved forward to receive the wine to indicate their willingness to move towards Christ. God's gifts are there for us, but we need to respond.

So, in these dark times, with a hidden enemy lurking unseen and seemingly out of control, let's respond in whatever way we can, a donation to the food bank, a phone call to someone we know is isolated, reaching out to someone we know is depressed. Let's think, not just about ourselves in the UK, but also those in poorer parts of the world where Coronavirus has been much more devastating.

The king in the story ended up inviting lots of people to his party. God's party is for everyone. And let's be ready for the party, not weighed down by our own trials, not judging people who we think are not sticking to the rules, but with an open heart, ready to welcome God's grace and ready to respond by looking out for those who are excluded. It was interesting to me that it was the man without appropriate outer garments that was, in the end, excluded from the wedding feast. It wasn't that he had done awful things or was harbouring terrible thoughts. Even when we feel down, depressed, despairing, we can put on the outer garments of joy and gracefulness and reach out to others from that place.

Let's party!

Prayer

Steadfast God, give us courage to keep on keeping on
even when the going is tough.

Compassionate God, fill us with love for one another,
Fill us love for your creation,
Fill us with love for friend and neighbour,
and for strangers and those we fear or dislike.

Creator God, give us eyes to see
the wonder and beauty of all that you have given us.

Growing God,
help us never to rest on our laurels thinking we can leave it all to you,
keep us always learning, always growing,
always willing to do our best
and then to learn how our best can become better.

God who comes to us in Christ,
make us always willing to move from where we feel comfortable
to where you are in the world – with the poor and the needy,
with the weak and struggling, with the persecuted and despised.

Teach us how to join you,
teach us how to bring your healing and peace to our broken world.

Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown, will you let my name be known,
Will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?

Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare should your life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?

Will you let the blinded see if I but call your name?
Will you set the prisoners free and never be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean, and do such as this unseen,
And admit to what I mean in you and you in me?

Will you love the 'you' you hide if I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world around,
Through my sight and touch and sound in you and you in me?

Lord, your summons echoes true when you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.
In your company I'll go where your love and footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow in you and you in me.

Blessing

The blessings of heaven,
The blessings of earth,
The blessings of sea and of sky;
On those we love this day
and on every human family
the gifts of heaven,
the gifts of earth,
and the gifts of sea and of sky.
May the love of Christ go with us
as we journey from here
into the wondrous creation God has made for us.