

The theme of today's gospel reading is one which is repeated several times throughout the Gospels. Jesus speaks of an invitation being offered, then rejected, then the offer being made to someone else. The image of a banquet is also one with which His Jewish listeners were also very familiar. The prophet Isaiah used the image to describe the fullness of life that God wants to bestow, not just on Israel, but on all the peoples of the world. This is the point that Jesus is making in His parable..... "death would be swallowed up in victory.....God would wipe away all tears from their eyes....."

In His story, Jesus builds on the banquet image of Isaiah. Jesus begins by saying that He is speaking about the Kingdom of Heaven. The King who is sending out the invitations is God Almighty, and those who are invited are the Jews. These then are the ones who would not come (they are "too busy to accept the King's invitation"). They may feel that there will be further opportunities later on, but Jesus makes it clear that there will be no further opportunities for them. This was their last chance.

The story is Jesus' solemn warning to people who failed to respond to Him and His message. Like the heedless guests in His message, they were turning down their last chance. Soon they would discover that they were excluded from the joyful banquet that God had prepared for His people, of which Isaiah the prophet wrote. Others, not originally invited, will take their places.

In every life, there are times when God offers us opportunities we may not have again. Very often we can't identify them at the time. We need not worry about missing such opportunities if we are trying to live with God at the centre of our life.

Where is God in your life. Is He at the centre – or somewhere on the fringe?

Are you more interested in finding out how little you need to do for God, rather than how much you can do? Is "avoiding sin" more important to you than "practising virtue"? Does your practice of religion stop short when you have fulfilled your "minimum obligation"?

If the answer to any of these questions is "Yes", then God is on the fringe of your life not at the centre. Then Jesus' story is addressed to you. You are in danger of throwing away opportunities offered to you by God. Opportunities that may not come your way again. There is a further danger when God is at the fringe of your life rather than at the centre. Even when we do respond to

the opportunities God offers, we may do so casually, like the man in the second part of Jesus' story, who came to the banquet unprepared (without wearing a wedding garment) and was thrown out. That part of the story seems unfair. After all, if the man was brought in from the street, how can anybody expect him to be properly dressed?

Scripture scholars tell us that Matthew has combined two originally separate stories. The first story was Jesus' warning that those who rejected Him were throwing away their chance of joining in the banquet God had prepared for His people. The second story was addressed to people in the Church of Matthew's day. Many of them were Gentiles, people not originally invited to the feast. This story warned that although God had now extended His invitation to all, nobody should accept the invitation casually.

I don't believe for one moment that Jesus was concerned about what the man was wearing. Against that comment some scholars have said that the wedding garment would have been provided by the host and that the man would have refused to wear it.

However, we're told elsewhere that Jesus looks deep within us – to the heart. "It's what is inside the person that is important, not what a person wears outside.

Very soon, we will be preparing to receive the sacrament of the Eucharist as we do week by week. Here is the continuing banquet that Jesus inaugurated for us in which He gives us His Body and Blood to sustain us in this life. God is the host at this Banquet and He longs to have you with Him. He wants to have you with Him. He wants to fill you with His GOODNESS, His POWER, and His LOVE. He can't fill you unless you first acknowledge your unworthiness.

Draw closer to Him in love as you join in those familiar words and invite Him to the centre of your life this very day.

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