

OCTOBER 9, 2011: TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 25:6-10a, Philippians 4:12-14,19-20, Matthew 22:1-10

We who recently experienced the marriage of the heir to the British throne, will find today's gospel parable hard to understand. How could anyone ignore or reject an invitation to such a significant event? The key to understanding this parable revolves around a proper understanding of Jesus' first words: "The kingdom of heaven may be likened to" As I frequently remind my readers and students, the biblical phrase "the kingdom of God" or it's parallel, "the kingdom of heaven" usually doesn't refer to the eternal life we're expecting to experience after our physical death. It refers to God working effectively in our lives right here and now, long before we're escorted through those pearly gates.

It's relatively easy to appreciate why someone would ignore or reject that kind of an invitation. At the very beginning of his public ministry, Jesus tells us that accepting this invitation entails repentance: a complete change in our value system. What we once thought important we now push to the periphery of our lives; what we once thought insignificant is now front and center in everything we do. As we hear over and over in the gospels, a sign we're working on this repentance is when people have become more important for us than our careers, wealth, institutions or even laws. Lots of people simply aren't willing to take such a drastic step in order to experience God's presence in everyone they meet and everything they do.

In the 50 year interval between the historical Jesus telling this parable and Matthew's writing it down for his readers, things happened which were eventually integrated into the original narrative. The church, for instance, had suffered persecution at the hand of some of their fellow-Jews, and Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. At one point someone even joined this story of a rejected wedding feast to another parable which revolved around someone flaunting the dress code for such an important occasion. (That's why I usually omit the last four verses from the liturgical reading.) Yet Jesus' basic message still remains: those who should have been the first to hear and respond to the good news of God's kingdom among us ignored it. An unexpected and unprepared people were the fortunate individuals who eventually accepted it. A powerful message for Matthew's Jewish/Christian community, dealing with an influx of Gentiles into the church. Some among Matthew's readers would have put these non-Jews into the same category as the sinners and outcasts of the historical Jesus' day and age: the people who came to the feast.

Obviously neither Jesus or Matthew was talking about a literal banquet, as Isaiah does in our first reading. But both could identify with the prophet's words about "removing the veil" from the Gentiles, and the fact it is Yahweh who ultimately saves us, Biblical Christians simply defined salvation in a way quite different from those who originally took Isaiah's words literally.

The belief that experiencing God's kingdom right here and now is part of God's plan of salvation is without doubt behind this section of Paul' letter to the Philippians. Once we take the steps necessary to cross into the kingdom of heaven, our entire outlook on everything changes. As Paul puts it, "In every circumstance and in all things I have learned the secret of being well fed and of going hungry, of living in abundance and of being in need. I can do all things in him who strengthens me." He's no focused on the things most people judge essential to their well-being. Paul's value system has shifted 180 degrees.

Jack Shea once remarked that Jesus was concerned with answering just three questions. "What do you want out of life? Where do you get it? How much does it cost?"

The answer to the last question probably stops a lot of us from even exploring the first two,

OCTOBER 16, 2011: TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 45:1, 4-6, I Thessalonians 1:1-5b, Matthew 22:15-21

Those unfamiliar with the biblical world frequently turn to today's gospel pericope to argue for two distinct realms in the world. One, the church, belongs to God; the other, the state, belongs to us humans. Neither should interfere or cross over into the other. Nothing could be further from biblical faith.

Jesus' confrontation with his enemies is resolved by having recourse to basic first century Middle-East economics: who owns the country's money? In contrast to modern monetary practice, the country's leader was looked upon as actually owning the currency circulating in his or her realm. In this case, if some of the coins circulating in Palestine are Roman denarii, the Roman emperor is their owner.

So when the Herodians - who work for the occupying Romans - and the Pharisees - who despise the Romans - jointly ask Jesus about the legality of paying taxes to Rome, Jesus points out the obvious. The image and inscription on the coin are a sign of Caesar's ownership. If Caesar wants his money back in taxes, one is obligated to return it. Neither the Herodians or Pharisees can argue the point.

The problem arises when Jesus ends his words with the command, ". . . and repay to God what belongs to God." Some contend that at this point Jesus is dividing the world into Caesar's realm and God's realm, and as I mentioned above, there should be no overlapping.

More than 500 years before Jesus' birth, Deutero-Isaiah turns heads and shakes theological pillars by referring to the Persian emperor Cyrus as "Yahweh's anointed," (The Hebrew word for anointed is "Messiah" - "Christ" in Greek. In other words, the prophet's calling him "Cyrus the Christ!")

The prophet constantly promises his fellow-exiled Jews in Babylon that Yahweh will soon return them to the Promised Land. Though they're glad to hear his message, most are disturbed by the details of their return. Counter to expectations, this new Exodus will be led not by a righteous, Torah-abiding, circumcised Jew, but by an uncircumcised, Gentile pagan! Why couldn't a good Jewish boy be the new Moses?

Well-informed about international events, Deutero-Isaiah knows Cyrus is conquering one country after another. And wherever this Persian leader goes, he grants the conquered people freedom to practice their own religion, to worship their own gods. The prophet's convinced that when Cyrus finally gets to Babylon, the exiled Jews will simply inform him that, to practice their faith and worship their God, they must return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. With a few modifications, that's exactly what happened. But many scholars believe that before it happened, Deutero-Isaiah was killed by his own people for teaching that Yahweh's anointed would be Cyrus. His ability to see God working through all wasn't shared by all. Deutero-Isaiah would have been the last person in Babylon to have pushed for a gulf between temple and state.

In a parallel way, Paul begins the earliest Christian writing we possess - 1 Thessalonians - by reminding his young Christian community, "Our gospel did not come to you in word alone, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with much conviction." In what does his "gospel" consist? We presume it's the same as Jesus' "good news," that God is present, working effectively in every aspect of our lives. It's the basic formulation of Jesus' faith.

So when Jesus says, "Repay to God what belongs to God!" he's presuming everything belongs to God; not just the coin, but the Herodians, the Pharisees, and even Caesar. God works through everyone and everything. That belief still disturbs many "good folk" today. But even John Courtney Murray, who doggedly fought for separation of church and state, still presumed God was working in both the church and the state.

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