

OCTOBER 15TH, 2017: TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

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

Meals obviously play a big role in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. They appear in all three of today's readings. But our sacred authors look at them from three different perspectives.

Though our first reading is often proclaimed at funerals, Isaiah isn't talking about heaven. The concept of an eternal reward awaiting us after our physical death wouldn't enter mainstream Jewish thought until about 600 years after his prophetic ministry. He's simply looking forward to an ideal age when there would be no death, when that "veil" which entraps all people will finally be destroyed. When that day arrives, everyone will gather on Mt. Zion – the mount on which Jerusalem's temple is built – for the most terrific banquet anyone could ever imagine. Yet I presume Isaiah knew such a day would never arrive during his lifetime. It was just his "when-my-ship-comes-in" dream, an expression of his faith in Yahweh's eventual care, no matter when and how it would appear.

Still, meals – and especially banquet type meals – were significant events in the biblical world. That seems to be why the gospel Jesus uses the metaphor of a big feast when he's trying to explain his insight into the "kingdom of heaven."

Before this story appeared in Matthew and Luke's gospels, scholars believe it was originally included in a now-lost collection of Jesus' sayings which they refer to as the "Q." Both evangelists changed it around a little to fit their unique theologies. Luke, for instance, who seems to have had problems with "Mrs. Luke," leaves out the meal's wedding aspect, and also adds another excuse for not attending: "I've just married a wife, and therefore" But in either case, gospel readers are reminded that lots of people miss the boat when it comes to recognizing God working effectively in their lives.

By the way, don't worry about the poor guy who was just walking down the main street, suddenly pulled into a wedding banquet, and then thrown out into the "darkness outside" because he's not wearing the proper clothes. Matthew has obviously meshed two separate stories into one, simply because they had something to do with wedding celebrations. The second story has nothing to do with the first.

Ignoring the second story, Jesus' message is clear: "Many are invited, but few are chosen." Matthew's readers can prove the point by just looking around. Few people are willing to die enough to themselves to actually experience God in their everyday lives. Though they're probably longing for such a heavenly encounter, they easily can find excuses for not following through on such a demanding invitation.

On the other hand, Paul of Tarsus is one of the few who has actually accepted the invitation. He's stepped into a life he could only have dreamt about before he came face to face with the risen Jesus on the Damascus road. By forming the giving relationship with others which that invitation requires, he discovers his value system has drastically been transformed – even about such basics as food. As he tells the Philippians, "I have learned the secret of being well fed and of going hungry, of living in abundance and of being in need." He has a new focus in life, a focus which actually brings life, no matter the circumstances he experiences.

Obviously Paul's disciples in Philippi have the same focus, else they wouldn't be sharing what they have with him.

It's more than interesting what people are able to do when they start to experience the risen Jesus among them, especially in the needy people among them. "I can do all things in him who strengthens me," Paul proclaims. But he would have accomplished nothing had he found an excuse to ignore God's invitation.

OCTOBER 22ND, 2017: TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

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

It might be best to start this commentary by looking at today's oft-misunderstood gospel pericope.

This passage is frequently employed by those who wish to divide the world between God and "Caesar," church and state. They frequently use it to defend their conviction that the church and its ministers should stick to "churchy" things, and leave matters of state to those who have a special expertise in such matters.

The main problem with such reasoning is that a church/state configuration of the world was unheard of at the time Matthew penned these lines. His Jesus is simply getting out of a trap set by his enemies, stating something obvious to everyone.

His enemies are convinced they have him cornered. If he says, "Yes, pay the tax!" the Pharisees would sneer and say, "You've just lost all credibility with the people. You're nothing but a lackey of our Roman occupiers."

Should he say, "No, don't pay the tax!" the Herodians would yell, "Traitor! Roman soldiers will be coming around later tonight to arrest you for treason to the Empire."

But by asking his enemies to produce the Roman coin used to pay the tax, then inquiring whose image and name are on the coin, he's saying, "If you've got something in your pocket that belongs to someone else – proven by the name and image – and that person wants it back, then you'd best give what's Caesar's back to Caesar."

The kicker, in this verbal confrontation is what comes next: "And repay God what belongs to God." In other words, "Why are you more interested in what Caesar owns than in what God owns?" The gospel Jesus obviously presumes the coin, the person who has it, and even Caesar belong to God, something his enemies have yet to learn.

Our sacred authors constantly try to get that point across. No one does it better than Deutero-Isaiah. He does it so well in today's first reading that some scholars believe these words actually were one of the reasons he was martyred.

Centuries before this unnamed prophet began his ministry, the Chosen People were convinced Yahweh would eventually send a special person to deliver them from all their troubles. They often referred to this unique savior as "Yahweh's Anointed." We're familiar with the Hebrew and Greek words for anointed: "Messiah and Christ." Deutero-Isaiah is daring to call the Persian emperor Cyrus - an uncircumcised, Gentile leader - Yahweh's Messiah (or in Greek, "Cyrus Christ!") For most exiled Israelites to whom the prophet was speaking, that was taking prophecy one step too far. In their minds, if Yahweh was going to save them, Yahweh would send a good Jewish boy – like Moses – to accomplish the task.

Yet, like Jesus, Deutero-Isaiah is convinced that everything and everyone belongs to God. He/she can work through anyone, even non-believers. It's up to us believers to discover God actually doing this.

Though after the prophet's death, Cyrus eventually freed the Israelites, the lesson of God's "broad behavior" was still hard to learn. Six centuries later, for instance, Paul runs into opposition from main-stream Jewish/Christians because he baptizes Gentiles without demanding they first convert to Judaism. Today's passage from I Thessalonians – our earliest Christian writing – shows how pleased he is that these non-Jewish converts are, without knowing anything about the 613 Mosaic Laws, performing "works of faith and labors of love." They're part of God's "Chosen" People even though they're not Jews.

As we know from Galatians 3, Paul is convinced that the risen Jesus is unlimited; neither Jew nor Gentile, slave or free, man or woman. Today we could add gay or straight, Democrat or Republican.

Only God knows what people we'll be expected to add to that list tomorrow.