

Fratelli tutti, welcome to the feast!

Twenty-eight Sunday of the Year A – Oct 11, 2020 **International Day of the Girl Child**
Readings: Isa 25:6-10; Phil 4:12-14, 19-20; Mt 22:1-14

“The Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food... of well-aged wines” (Isa 25:6)

Prologue: The first and third readings provide us with the imagery of banquets and feasts, which are loaded with messages. They are not just ordinary ‘secular dinners’ but signify God’s intervention and the eschatological banquet: heaven, too. In the Bible, ‘*who*’ is host or guest, invited or uninvited, accepts or rejects, ‘*how*’, and made to sit ‘*where*’ is symbolic of insiders and outsiders, wise and foolish, winners and losers. Much as today’s ‘*parable of the wedding banquet*’—like the parables of the previous two Sundays—is aimed at the “chief priests and elders” (Mt 21:23) who question Jesus’ authority and reject his message, could it also be aimed at me? you? Welcome to the feast!

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. *The Inviter:* In today’s first reading, which forms part of the so-called ‘*Apocalypse of Isaiah*’ spanning chapters 24–27, Isaiah offers a benchmark image of the final, eschatological banquet. Written well after the return of the captives from the Babylonian exile, it imaginatively and picturesquely projects God’s final victory not only over the Israelites’ earthly enemies—in this case, the Moabites (see vv.10-12)—but also over humankind’s invincible enemy: death (see 1 Cor 15:54-57). “On this mountain (Sion, Jerusalem) ...” that Isaiah points to, God will be the Host of a banquet—exotic and extravagant—with “rich food ... filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear” (v.6), which will be universal since “all peoples” will be invited. This celebration therefore is both, a victory feast as well as a messianic banquet. God, the Host, “will wipe away the tears from all faces” (v.8; see Rev 21:4) and ensure that all those invited, wining and dining, “will be glad and rejoice in his salvation” (v.9; see Rev 19:4). This ‘victory banquet’ will later be interpreted as the Messiah-Christ’s victory over death since by his own death on Mount Calvary, he will remove “the shroud that is cast over all peoples” (v.7) and his messianic kingdom will be inaugurated at Pentecost. The “hand of the Lord” (v.10) is the power of God soon to be manifested in a new Jerusalem, new church and new covenant—no longer exclusive but universal and all-embracing. This prediction will find echo in Matthew’s gospel passage with “a *king* who gave a wedding banquet for his *son*.” In Luke’s gospel it is simply “someone” who invites “a great many” for “a great dinner” (14:16).
2. *The Invitees who Accept or Reject:* While the invited guests in the first reading are, obviously, all peoples of all nations, in Matthew’s gospel passage, the invited guests are ‘*special*’ for they’ve been chosen and invited long before the actual day of the wedding celebrations. And, to give a present-day spin to the parable, their ‘oral RSVP’ would’ve been: “certainly, I’ll come!” To be invited by the king for the prince’s wedding is a ‘*kairos*’ (climactic moment) of unimaginable proportion; to refuse to go, is equally unimaginably insulting and inexplicable. Moreover, the excuses to reject the king’s magnanimous invite are petty and lame: one invitee is busy with farming, the other with moneymaking—mundane Monday to Friday activities that could be tended by anyone, anytime. Matthew’s version of the feast uses a lot of allegory and hyperbole and sounds unrealistic. For instance, which invited guest would not only reject the invitation but even kill the servants?

(v.6) Or, which enraged king would send his troops to “destroy” the guests who rejected the offer and also “burn their cities”? (v.7). These burning and destruction details seem to indicate that the text refers to the events from 66 AD–70 AD, i.e., the Jewish war and destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem (70 AD) since Matthew’s gospel is written after that for Jews converting to Christ’s Way. Be that as it may, finally, the specially invited guests continue with their joyless, traditional work with property and money, while the riff-raff with no farm and business to bother about have a ball—feasting as never before: their *kairos*! This is where the parable ends in the gospel of Luke; not so in Matthew’s

3. *Terms and Conditions of Feasting*: Verses 11–14 mentioning the “wedding garment” and the punishment meted out to a guest without one, is an addition in Matthew’s gospel. One might ask: how can that poor guest be expected to have a wedding garment if he’d been hauled in unexpectedly from the street corner? Apparently, Matthew stresses that all are invited in, but not on too easy terms. One must be prepared for the occasion, the outer garment being symbolic of inner disposition—without which, instead of being in the wedding limelight, one is thrown into “outer darkness”, instead of eating with hands and dancing with feet, one is “bound hand and foot” and instead of exulting and eating, one finds oneself “weeping and gnashing teeth”. Clearly, it’s not enough to be invited, one must prepare oneself; it’s insufficient to be chosen, one must celebrate. Now not addressed to the Jewish chief priests and elders who, though “chosen” reject both, the kingly inviter and the princely wedding banquet, these verses contain a covert caveat to all Christians—you and me, members of the new Israel, the church—not just to rejoice at the calling but to fulfill the membership conditions and don the inner robes worthy of wedding guests.

Linking the Psalm and 2nd Reading to the Theme of Feasting and Fasting, too:

- Sandwiched between 1st and 2nd readings, the shepherd psalm (23) is sung. But, now, not with the usual “The Lord is my shepherd” refrain, but with “in the Lord’s own house shall I dwell forever;” for, God has prepared “a banquet for me; my cup is overflowing” (v.5).
- The Philippians were the only converts from whom Paul accepted any financial help. His ‘holy indifference’ in discerning and deciding between ends is awe-inspiring: “In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.” For him, feasting and fasting were only a means of getting ever closer to the One Host and King who had called him, chosen him, nourished him and clad him with a wedding garment that made him boast: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (v.13).

Papal Concern and Indian Society’s Unconcern on International Day of the Girl Child

In his just-published “*encyclical letter on fraternity and social friendship*” entitled ‘*Fratelli tutti*’, Pope Francis writes: “Issues of human fraternity and social friendship have always been a concern of mine (n.5), and adds in n.110, “Words like freedom, democracy or fraternity prove meaningless, for the fact is that only when our economic and social system no longer produces even a single victim, a single person cast aside, will we be able to celebrate *the feast of universal fraternity.*” When will every Indian girl child like the raped and murdered Manisha Valmiki of Hathras, UP, sit at God’s Table and eat rich food with you and me—who are called, chosen and consecrated?
