

Trinity 19 Sermon – “The Banquet of Grace – RSVP” (Psalm 23, Isaiah 25:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14)

"Heavenly Father, may these spoken words be faithful to the written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord." Amen.

The readings today bring together three powerful images: a feast, a shepherd, and a people who are invited to a banquet.

Isaiah gives us the vision of a great banquet on the mountain of the Lord. Psalm 23 gives us the familiar picture of God as the shepherd who leads us beside still waters and prepares a table before us. And in Matthew, Jesus tells a parable about a king who prepares a wedding banquet for his son and invites his guests to come.

At first these passages seem to speak about rather different things. But underneath them is one great theme, that of God desiring to gather his people into the joy of his presence.

Isaiah's vision is wonderfully extravagant. Verse 6 says, “The Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines.” This is not a austere meal. It’s not just a meal to keep people alive. It is a feast of abundance.

And notice who prepares it. God does. The people do not have to earn their place at the table. They do not have to bring the food. They do not have to prove themselves worthy. God himself prepares the feast.

Isaiah sees this banquet as the fulfilment of God's purposes for humanity. The veil or shroud that has covered the nations is removed. Death is

swallowed up. Tears are wiped away. Shame and reproach are taken away. A feast is prepared!

And the people respond, “This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.” There is such deep hope in this declaration. God's salvation is not pictured as simply an escape from something bad, but as being brought into something wonderfully good.

Christian faith is not about God reluctantly, begrudgingly letting people into his presence. It is about God opening the door and saying, “Come, all peoples! The feast is ready!”

Psalm 23 takes that same image and makes it very personal. “The Lord is **my** shepherd.” The shepherd leads, protects, restores and accompanies. Even when the path goes through “the valley of the shadow of death”, the shepherd remains present.

And then the Psalm turns to a very different image in verse 5, “You have set a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me.” The shepherd becomes the host. God who has led and accompanied us through the wilderness now prepares a table for us.

There is a close connection between Psalm 23 and the Gospel. God does not promise that the Christian life will be a smooth and gentle uphill path, a life without valleys. We are not told that faithful people will never encounter grief, uncertainty, disappointment or suffering. Instead, we are promised something more profound: God will be **with** us in the valley, and God will prepare a table for us **beyond** it. The presence of the shepherd is the heart of the promise.

In his parable, Jesus speaks about a king who prepares a wedding banquet for his son. The invitations go out, but those who are invited refuse to come. Some simply ignore the invitation. Others become hostile towards the messengers. Eventually the king orders his servants, “Go therefore into the main streets, and invite **everyone** you find to the wedding banquet.”

The invitation is widened and graciously extended. Those who finally enter the banquet are not there because they have achieved some special status. They are gathered from the streets. The good and the bad are invited, indiscriminately.

The kingdom of God is not a private dinner party for the respectable. The invitation is radically generous. This is one of the things that Jesus repeatedly teaches us – God’s grace is wider than our categories.

People are often inclined to divide others into those who belong and those who do not belong; those who are respectable and those who are disreputable; those who deserve God's favour and those who apparently do not.

But Jesus keeps opening the doors wider. The banquet is God's gift.

The parable does contain a disturbing moment. The king sees a guest who is not wearing a wedding garment and has him thrown out. At first this can seem rather harsh. If people have been gathered in from the streets, how could they be expected to have wedding clothes?

The point, however, is not really about clothes. The wedding garment represents the response to God's invitation. Grace is free, but grace is never cheap or superficial.

The invitation to the banquet calls for a response. We cannot simply say, “God loves me, therefore nothing matters.” God's love invites us into a transformed life. The wedding garment can be understood as the life that corresponds to the gift we have received: a life of repentance, faith, love and gratitude.

We do not earn our place at the banquet by wearing the right clothes, by behaving respectably or conservatively. Rather, because we have been invited, we allow God's grace to clothe and transform us. That distinction matters.

It's not a matter of *“If I am good enough, perhaps God will invite me.”* It is rather, *“God has invited me; how then shall I live?”*

The parable ends with these striking words, “For many are called, but few are chosen.” Regretably, these words have sometimes been used to make Christianity sound like an exclusive club, where God chooses a fortunate few and rejects the rest.

But that misses the extraordinary generosity described in the parable. The invitation has gone out again and again. The doors have been opened. People from the highways and streets have been welcomed. The tragedy is not that God is unwilling to invite. The tragedy is that people can refuse the invitation.

God's grace can be resisted. We can become so preoccupied with our own affairs that we fail to notice the invitation. We can be so busy with our possessions, our ambitions, our anxieties and our resentments that we miss the feast God is offering.

The danger is not that God says, “You are not good enough.” The danger is that we say, “I am too busy to come. I can’t be bothered.”

For Christians, the three readings usually bring the Eucharist to mind. Every time we gather around the Lord's Table, we are given a foretaste of Isaiah's banquet. We come not because we are perfect. We come because we are invited. We come with our joys and our sorrows, our faith and our doubts, our successes and our failures.

And Jesus says, “Come to the table.” That is why the language of the Eucharistic invitation is so important. The table is not a reward for the spiritually successful. It is proof of God's grace.

And yet, as the Gospel reminds us, coming to the table means allowing ourselves to be changed by the one who welcomes us. We receive Christ and then Christ reshapes us by the power of his love and his Holy Spirit. We receive mercy so that we may become merciful. We receive forgiveness so that we may become forgiving. We receive love so that we may become people of love.

Perhaps this is particularly important when life feels uncertain. There are times when we find ourselves in the valley of Psalm 23. We may not understand where God is leading us. We may experience bereavement, loneliness, disappointment or fear. At such times, we realise that we have not been promised that everything will immediately become easy. The promise we did receive is in the words, “You are with me.” And there is a table ahead.

Isaiah gives us the ultimate horizon of that promise when he envisages a day when God will wipe away every tear, when death will be swallowed up, and when God's people will finally say, “Let us rejoice and be glad that he has saved us.”

The banquet is both present and future for we taste something of it now through worship, fellowship, in the Eucharist, in acts of kindness and generosity, and whenever God's love breaks through into ordinary human life. But the fulness of the banquet still lies ahead.

The question for us today is very simple, “How are we responding to God's invitation?” Are we too busy to come? Are we carrying wounds that make it difficult to believe that we are welcome? Or do we think that the invitation is meant for other people but not for us? Or, have we heard the voice of Jesus saying to each one of us, “Come. The table is prepared.”

Psalm 23 assures us that the shepherd is already leading us there. Isaiah assures us that the feast will be abundant. And Jesus assures us that the invitation is going out into the streets – to ordinary people, to unlikely people, and to people like us.

The table is prepared. The invitation has been given. And the delighted RSVP in the words of Isaiah, “Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.” Amen.