

The Big Dinner Party

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 23, Year A (RCL). Isaiah 25:1-9, Psalm 23, Philippians 4:1-9, Matthew 22:1-14. October 9, 2011. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance. (The first annual Homecoming of Trinity, Alliance.) The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

The Bible likes to use a particular picture or image of a heavenly welcome, and that image is a dinner party. Jesus speaks of a great feast at his Father's table in the kingdom of heaven. The prodigal son's father throws a feast to honor his lost son's return. Jesus works his first miracle at a wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. The list goes on and on. There are banquet images in today's readings from Isaiah and Matthew and in the famous Twenty-third Psalm.

The big, festive meal where everybody is having the time of their lives is a picture God knows will get our attention. Everybody has to eat, and we like mixing food with celebration. So God has seen to it that Holy Scripture uses the big dinner party as a major image conveying welcome, celebration, abundance, and delight.

God presents this as the core image of the kind of relationship he wants to have with us. God welcomes us and invites us to the party in whatever condition we find ourselves when we happen to notice his welcome, so to speak. And that is one aspect of today's reading from Matthew's gospel.

The other aspect is more difficult because it is less fun. We must be *transformed* by accepting the welcome and participating in the celebration. God's grace exists not only to save us from sin and death but, insofar as we take seriously the invitation to be in fellowship God, his grace operates to change our lives for the better. God is a God not only of welcome and mercy but righteousness and justice. If we're around him much, and paying good attention, we'll receive the nourishment of divine wisdom and the encouragement of divine love. We will want to strive to be worthy of the abundant life we receive from God.

That is why the fellow without a wedding garment is kicked out at the end of the story we heard today. He stands for the person who refuses to accept the fact that holiness—accepting God's invitation to the big party—means change. We are called to change in the direction of certain characteristics; there is a helpful list of them in today's reading from the wonderful conclusion of Paul's letter to the Philippians:

“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

Paul says that if we focus on qualities like that as we conduct our lives, the God of peace will be with us. But in terms of what I've been saying in this sermon, the point is that we will be doing these things because we want to be with the God of peace, who loves us and went to the cross for us to welcome us to the giant dinner party: that huge, everlasting, eternal, abundant, uplifting celebration of life that is the essence of God's relationship with his creation.

Who wants to be left out of that? The decision belongs to nobody but us.