

We're invited to a feast

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Two of our readings today speak of festivities and celebrations!

What a vision we find in the OT reading! "... the Lord will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines..." Indeed, what a party! Rich food, fine wine! And what a host! None other than God! And what a guest list! All peoples!

This passage takes us into a remarkable vision! Our hopes usually are confined to personal or quite immediate matters—ambitions for ourselves, family hopes, what we wish for our community or church. But this prophet's vision of the world's peoples united in joy with God takes us beyond ourselves and our hopes to share in God's own dream for God's world.

The world, at the moment, would do well to rediscover that dream! Yesterday's newspapers seemed to agree that the previous day had been 'Black Friday'. The deepening economic crisis that is overtaking the capitalist world creates much uncertainty and anxiety in most of us. But as if to put that in perspective, last week's "Dateline" on SBS showed the desperate situation in which the people of Haiti are living, made unimaginably worse by the recent hurricanes. There is so much inequality and suffering in our world. And to that we can add all the prejudice and fear; the lack of understanding and honest perspectives; growing hatred, terrifying violence and the inevitable mixture of retaliation and revenge.

In contrast, here yesterday afternoon, there was a lovely celebration of a marriage, with the happy festivities that followed. In its own small way, it captured something of the dream that the ancient prophet articulated by a picture of a festive banquet.

It also seems to me that Rob and Sandy are seeing and reflecting something of that dream—the dream of God—as together they have lived with and continue to face all the complications and implications of Rob's illness.

The ancient prophetic vision of God's dream is one that embraces every individual as well as being a dream for all the world's peoples to be united in joy with God - sharing in God's own dream for God's world. It is the reign of God over God's re-created world. It is likened to a feast, a festival—and it is for all people! And that makes this vision that much more special, coming as it does in this section of Isaiah, which was composed while the nation was facing the humiliation of defeat. So, we might expect the future dream to be only about the nation's recovery. Certainly the promise is that the nation will be delivered from its shame, its disgrace; but the promise goes much further - God will remove the veil of mourning that envelopes every nation: "He will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations". God's dream for the world is for everyone—the promise of God's mercy is all-inclusive. How desperately we need right now to dream this dream God has for the world!

The gospel reading is the parable of the wedding banquet.

The reference to a wedding banquet evokes several traditions. 1. Marriage is used in several prophets as a metaphor for God's covenant relationship with God's people. 2. Feasting and eating indicate participation in God's purposes. The Passover festival and meal, for example, ensure the continuing celebration of God's relationship with the people. The return from exile and the re-making of the covenant are celebrated in the invitation to feast on "rich food". A meal also symbolises the yet-future completion of God's purposes, when God's reign is fully established. 3. The wedding feast also invokes associations built up through the gospel around eating. Food is a gracious gift from God, a symbol of God's justice and provision of adequate

resources for all, of God's goodness and transforming presence. Jesus' meals with the marginal people, such as "tax collectors and sinners", show the all-inclusive extent of God's goodness and mercy, which Jesus manifests. Unlikely people participate in God's mercy!

Meals symbolise God's dream for the world and all people. So, again in the parable, the salvation offered to us by God is likened to a festival.

But at the same time, the parable contains an unmistakable warning: the word for "invite" also means "call" (he sent his slaves to call those who had been invited). Paul used the same word to describe the power of the gospel, which 'calls' people to God. The point is - God's call to salvation. And acceptance of the invitation should take precedence over everything. But we find that is not the case. The general invitation already issued is now about to bear fruit, but amazingly no one takes it seriously. The point is that devout Jews had decided unequivocally to live for God, but at the very moment when the feast, to which they had been looking forward, comes to them in the invitation of Jesus, they do not notice it or respond to it.

In three consecutive parables (this is the third), Jesus had addressed the religious leaders of Israel. The repetition underlines the gravity of the leaders' response - they have rejected God's purposes, and Jesus - and it impresses on the audience the need for fruitfulness and faithfulness in carrying out their mission, especially among the poor.

In considering the parable, many have noted that, along with the basic appearance of being a story, there are significant very unrealistic aspects: such as, the rejection of the king's invitation by everyone; the shameful treatment and killing of the king's servants, and the consequences; then proceeding immediately with the wedding in the burned city; the invitation to the unlikely guests; the inspection of the guests' clothing; the exclusion of a poor guest for not having the right garment. None of these features of the parable seem to be very realistic. But what they do is force our attention away from the story of what supposedly happened to what the story means.

Perhaps the original point of the parable was that those who were invited did not realise the decision had to be made then and there. So, the parable still speaks relevantly to us: the Kingdom of God is not just something that will come one day in glory, but it is already present for us in Jesus' invitation.

One way we hear the invitation is in weekly worship. To continue the imagery of the readings, we can say that in a sense our celebration of the Eucharist is a foretaste of the messianic banquet. In a sense, we get a glimpse into the "wedding banquet" that God prepares for us. The Eucharist is a dramatisation, or a living picture, of the banquet described in Isaiah and to which the parable refers.

In our celebration of the Eucharist we have, as it were, a foretaste of the Kingdom of God. At the Eucharist, we share the word of God, we pray, we care about each other, we offer ourselves to God, we are fed with the 'bread of life' and the 'cup of salvation'. This is a vision of the banquet, to which the realisation of God's dream, the Kingdom, is likened.

Yet, we know that the struggle towards that realisation still goes on. We know it from our own experience—and the second part of the parable reminds us of it. We should not simply include ourselves amongst those who have accepted the invitation of Christ, and have thus found our way to the banquet hall. The second part reaffirms that the invitation in the parable is still operative today. It is not just a once and for all acceptance of the invitation: rather, that acceptance must continue to put its stamp upon our entire life—only so will we continue to sit at the feast.

The "wedding clothes" mean something like a new mode of life—"putting on Christ", like a garment that covers one completely—becoming a new person. But this new mode of life is to be festive, not a new form of legalism, as it can so easily become in the church. Our call should shape our whole lives, so that we fully participate in the abundant life of the Gospel.

How do we know the extent to which our call as Christians does shape our whole lives? Well, without doubt, the biblical measure is the extent to which we care and love. To remain faithful to the call is to work for justice and for the well-being of others. The image of the Banquet in the scripture readings reminds us of that: for the Hebrew people, a meal in common was a sign of fellowship / togetherness / solidarity. It is a matter of living according to the demands placed on us by the other person. It gives us a vision, a hope, for our own lives and the life of the world that is amazingly relevant and desperately needed. The image of the festive banquet at which all people, every nation, gather to feast on fine food and well-aged wine is a biblical image that symbolises God's dream for God's world. This morning—through the readings and in the eucharistic celebration—we are being reminded of God's invitation to sit at the festive table.