

8/29/04

PENTECOST 13

Luke 14:1, 7-14, C #17

Banquets and our behavior at them: that's the focus of Jesus' words to us today. But he's not trying to teach us the tricks of the banquet circuit, is he, whether we be the host or the host-ed? No. Jesus is saying something about how one should approach the banquet, because there is an approach which is a "killer" to enjoyment of the feast and blessing from it.

The "killer approach?" How about selfishness, self-centeredness, self-servingness? "This is all about getting something for me, rather than enjoying something with others." That is the attitude which is at the heart of both the invited and the inviter in the story which Jesus has just told us: the invited jostle, juggle, push and shove to position themselves in what they deem the best places; the inviter invites only those from whom he can get some future gain.

Well, what of us, at this weekly banquet, in this parish a daily banquet – this banquet called the Mass which is both foretaste of and preparation for that eternal banquet which God the Father wants us at, with himself, and his Son in their Spirit? **Notice what I just said:** the Mass is *not only* a foretaste of that eternal banquet at which God wants us. The Mass is *also* our preparation for that banquet. How we approach the Mass, therefore, may end up being determinative of whether or not we'll be part of the eternal Mass in heaven. Why? Because the approach you and I bring to this holy feast is the way we are living our life day by day. So, how do we approach this "thing", this Mass?

Well, we are intelligent people and intelligence enables us to manage our lives. So we manage situations, money, crises, people to make life better, easier, less stressful for ourselves. And we bring these same managerial skills to our worship of God. Ah, but here we encounter a problem: God is not manageable, and his Mass is not either.

For instance, intelligence enables us to be in touch with what we think are our needs and to get them addressed. So we approach the Mass with our private desires, only to discover that it is a quite public affair. Think of this:

- ▶ The Mass forces us to relate to others, to suffer their idiosyncrasies and irritations to us, and it keeps bombarding us with ideas and issues much larger than our own.
- ▶ Further, we come to Mass in various moods and then feel rebuffed because it creates its own climate. Sometimes we come in a lighthearted condition and find our jollity muted as the Mass focuses on the sadness of our fallen human predicament. Other times we come down in the dumps, only to find the joy of the Mass assailing our desire to wallow in self-pity and misery, and to have others feel sorry for us too.

The Mass, you see, both simply and severely suggests that God's moods are more important than ours, and that instead of seeking to be humored by him and others, we should seek to humor him, and then them. The Mass reminds us that, when God's ways are not ours, we are the ones out of sync, not him.

The Mass is not primarily for us; it is for God. It is an offering we make of ourselves to him, because he IS God, and we are not, and He upon whom both our present and future life depend is due the sacrifice of our time and attention.

The Mass is something we can do and should do beautifully for God, and beauty is its own reason for existence ... *unless* you count in the fact that beauty and giving oneself over to doing something beautifully ennobles human beings. Further, the Mass needs no excuse to justify our doing it except the excuse that God IS ... *unless* you count in the fact that the doing of it, the sacrificing of our time and our talent and our attention to the doing of it well, also makes human beings holy.

Because the Mass is a thing of beauty offered to the God who gives himself to us in our service, many people approach it as spectators, expecting to get something from it for themselves: to be inspired, perhaps; to be moved, to be thrilled, to be comforted, to be ... entertained. And while each and every item just mentioned may occur, none of them are what the Mass is for. Its purpose is neither to inspire, to move, or to thrill any of us. If there is anyone for whom the Mass's purpose is to inspire, move or thrill, that one is God. He is our audience. We are not his.

The 20th century English historian and critic, Hilaire Belloc, expresses this well in an imaginative conversation he relates between the Father and Peter the Apostle in heaven: One day, while scanning his creation, the Father fixes his gaze upon earth. He asks Peter what this little speck is and Peter tells him about us, including his Son's visit to us and what happened. "Yes, yes," the Father nods, remembering it all.

Then he asks Peter what that lovely activity is in which some of earth's inhabitants are engaged. When Peter tells him, "They are worshiping you," a broad smile creases the Father's face and he says, "Ah, continue. Have them continue."

Something beautiful for God, not for us, but for God. The Mass is at least that one beautiful thing we can do for God week by week. And here is a fact that has proved itself true for 2000 years: those who do the Mass faithfully, as an act of loving attentiveness to God, not just being present at it (though that is a good beginning) but trying to make their offering of themselves in it the best, the most loving they can ... these are transformed by the Mass, so that their lives in the week beyond this moment become increasingly something beautiful for God. That is what is supposed to happen: ***We pray the Mass in order to live the Mass.***

Surely each of us have heard people say, and likely at some time we ourselves have said, "I don't get anything out of worship." Well, that's the "killer approach" against which Jesus speaks today in the gospel.

You want to insure, whether from the Mass or from any human relationship, that you are not going to get something from it? Approach it in that attitude: "What's in this for me?"

BUT, come to the Mass and to any human relationship only to give, to give yourself ... and I assure you, some time or another, you are going to be surprised by joy. And the joy will be so deep, springing up as it does from such a depthless fountain, that you will be shocked by how long you are able to live on its refreshment.