

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, one God, Amen.

A wedding is a joyful time, a celebration of the union of two as “one flesh.” From royal weddings to unions of our friends and families, many want to feel a part of the joyous day. In our Orthodox service, the two are crowned and the mystery is revealed as being an image of the union between Christ and his Church: we rejoice with the couple, and in that rejoicing, we feast with them.

A meal, or a feast, is perhaps one of the last liturgical actions which have been preserved within our contemporary society. Fr Alexander Schmemmann of blessed memory writes:

“A meal is still a rite – the last “natural sacrament” of family and friendship, of life that is more than “eating” and “drinking”. To eat is still something more than to maintain bodily functions. People may not understand what that “something more” is, but they nonetheless desire to celebrate it. They are still hungry and thirsty for sacramental life.”

In other words, a meal, a feast, is still understood as being more than nutrition, more than sustenance: it is an invitation to a greater world, a world where there is more than function, where there are beauty and love. The world around us knows this too – knows it but does not understand it – and even in this world, a meal takes on this aspect of beauty and love. Fr Alexander, again, describes it thus,

“And when expecting someone whom we love, we put a beautiful tablecloth on the table and decorate it with candles and flowers, we do all this not out of necessity, but out of love.”

It is this mystical understanding of wedding and feast which the Lord draws our attention to today. “Mystical,” not in the sense of a problem to be solved but that we experience both on a fuller plane than their mere parts. And so, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we contemplate today’s Gospel. “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the marriage feast.” The Lord describes his Kingdom in terms of a marriage feast, in terms of a mystery which we can all recognise but may find it difficult to put into words: but although being invited, “they would not come.” The Lord calls again, “everything is ready; come to the marriage feast.” No waiting, no additional requirements, yet they make their excuses and even attack his messengers, “But they made light of it and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them.”

We may interpret these two messages to be the calling to the children of Israel, firstly by Moses and secondly by the prophets. The Lord, we are told through the character of the king, “was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.” These words foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem were said forty years before it was destroyed: the Lord, in his mercy, gave time for the entire generation of Jews to repent and come to know him before the Roman army laid waste to Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple which has not been rebuilt even to this day, though the emperor, Julian the Apostate, did try.

So the Lord calls new guests, the Gentiles: he has made the marriage feast for his son and will celebrate. “And those servants,” his messengers, “went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.” All are called, both bad and good. God desires all to come to enter the kingdom of heaven, he does not distinguish between us because we are all created with his image imprinted upon us. “But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment; and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless.” This was no trick, no test: the wedding garment was provided by the king.

And how, dear brothers and sisters, does the Lord know who has put on the wedding garment? We may find the answer in another image, another parable, soon to follow in the Gospel of Matthew though we hear it read on one of the Sundays before Great Lent: the Parable of the Last Judgement. In it, the Lord divides the sheep from the goats – not such an easy task as to be able merely to look at them. For an outsider may have difficulty yet the shepherd recognises the sheep by their approach in humility; the goats, on the other hand, come with pride and can be separated to the left. So too in today's Gospel, those who wear the wedding garment have the humility to do as the king directs them whereas those who do not believe their mere presence suffices: they believe that they do not need to change themselves because they have been invited even without their deserving it. "Bind him hand and foot," says the king to his servants, "and cast him into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen."

This is certainly one level of the teaching, that those originally called are the Jews, by Moses and by the prophets, and their city was burned because they refused to come to the banquet, that then the gentiles come yet those without a wedding garment – freely offered – will share the same fate as those who ignore the invitation; one level of teaching but not the only. For while we may look at the Jews as ignoring the invitation, how often do we ourselves ignore it? How often do we place the Gospel secondary in our lives?

During the Vigil for Pascha, immediately after we sing "Christ is risen" for the first time, we hear the Psalm verse "Let God arise, and his enemies be scattered, and let those that hate him flee before his face." Are we scattered? Do we flee into the night away from the light of his face? Do we hold onto the Lord or onto something, someone, else? Yes, "Let God arise," but we arise with him, we follow him wherever he may lead.

At the end of St Matthew's Gospel, the Lord gives us a word for our lives as his followers:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

"Go, therefore ... [to] all the nations," go to Poole, go to Bournemouth, go to Dorset and Hampshire, go to Somerset and Wiltshire, go to your family, your neighbours, your colleagues, your friends: "teaching them to observe all things," the Lord commands. This is not an additional extra, not a nice addition to a Christian life, but fundamental to our lives. The Church is sent out, goes out, and offers the Good News of Christ's saving death and resurrection to all.

Over a thousand years ago, St Bede wrote a history of the Church in this country. He said of the Christians in Britain, surrounded by English and Saxons who were not believers:

"Among other most wicked actions, not to be expressed, which their own historian ... mournfully takes notice of, they added this that they never preached the faith to the Saxons or English, who dwelt amongst them; however, the goodness of God did not forsake his people whom He foreknew, but sent to that nation much more worthy preachers, to bring it to the faith."

Do we deserve the same words applied to us today? Given that we are Christians, that "we have found the true faith," as we sing after communion, that we have the Church preserved throughout history and even to this day, are our actions "wicked" too? It is a consolation to us that the history written by St Bede does not end at this point, that "much more worthy preachers," came "to bring it to the faith." A consolation but not a justification. For if we justify our inaction to be Christians as being unworthy preachers, will our Lord also find that we have not put on our wedding garment?

What then must we do? There are some who believe evangelism is to knock on doors and offer leaflets or to shout out on street corners with biblical quotations on billboards: these are not within the tradition of the Church. The start is, and always must be, prayer: prayer for our neighbour. But not a prayer seeking for another person to act in his life, a prayer that I may act. For if we pray and then ignore the prayer, expecting another to fulfil it, then it is no prayer.

Pray for a neighbour, a friend, a family member. Say the name before the Lord, offer it up. Ask that the Lord will create a possibility where you may share the Good News of Christ. And trust that the Lord will create the possibility if it is right for you. In all you do, in all you say, be humble and kind.

Show us, therefore, O Lord, to be neither as the invited guests who refuse to come nor as the bad guest who refuses a wedding garment, but as followers of thy way, that we may come to know thy Father through thee by the power and operation of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.