

The parable in today's gospel, like the parable of the vineyard which we read last Sunday, is addressed to those among the Jewish people who are most critical of Jesus and his claims.

Like so many of the parables, this one too is about "the kingdom of God." As used by Jesus, the phrase the "kingdom of God" denotes primarily God himself, and more specifically, God as turned to us, offering forgiveness and reconciliation and a share in his life. The image of a wedding banquet or of some other festive meal for the kingdom was widespread in early Christianity and contemporary Judaism. Although the fundamental thrust of the image is a positive one, the emphasis in today's parable is more negative. Its initial focus is on those who have been invited and agreed to come, but who, now that the time for the banquet has arrived, are refusing to do so. Some go so far as to seize and kill the messengers sent by the king. The king's response is one of violence. "He sent his troops," we are told, "destroyed those murderers, and burned their city."

Matthew, who wrote his gospel late in the first century was probably thinking at this point of what happened to Jerusalem when it was taken and largely destroyed by the Romans in the year 70.

Although the parable might well have stopped at this point, it doesn't. The king's servants are sent out to invite anyone they can find, both the good and the bad. The reference here is probably to the missionary outreach of the early church to the non-Jewish world, the world of the Gentiles. The incident of the man without a wedding robe underlines that simply becoming a member of the community of faith is not enough. If one hopes to share in the eternal banquet, one must prepare oneself, must, in the words of St Paul, put on Christ, and become his disciple.

If the emphasis in today's gospel is on the theme of judgment, the first reading, from the prophet Isaiah, strikes a more positive note. It is a text that is full of hope and promise and, for that reason, is often chosen for funerals.

The prophet speaks of the end times and of the definitive coming of God's kingdom. It will be like a great banquet, he suggests, "a feast of rich food and of well-aged wines." As the host at that banquet, God will welcome all peoples and will take away from them the shroud that has been cast over them. He will wipe away their tears, and death will be no more. Isaiah's vision is picked up and reaffirmed in the last book of the New Testament, the Book of Revelation with its vision of the holy city Jerusalem coming down from heaven like a bride adorned

for her husband. "Death will be no more," a voice declares. "Mourning and crying and pain will be no more." An angel proclaims: "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb," the marriage, that is, between the risen Christ and the community of believers, the church.

If a shared meal is a key image of the kingdom in its fulfillment, it is not surprising that comparable meals are presented in the gospels as important moments in the life of Jesus. The fact that among those with whom he eats are publicans and sinners scandalizes the self-righteous. They understand that a meal at which Jesus is present is never just a meal. By sitting down at table with others, he is announcing his desire to enter into communion or fellowship with them. It is for people like them, he is saying, that he has come.

The climax of the many meals described or referred to in the gospels at which Jesus is present is the Last Supper. There he not only takes leave of and encourages the disciples, he entrusts to them a new meal, the eucharistic meal, the sacrament of himself. The Eucharist is meant to be a foretaste and a foreshadowing of the heavenly banquet to which the prophet points forward and which Jesus promised to share with us in eternal life.

Although many people today eat on the run or text or do other things while eating, most of us still have a sense of what it means truly to share a meal with others, with family or friends or with someone we would like to get to know better. Meals where that happens are marked not only by the quality of the food but also and more importantly by the nature of the conversation that takes place and by the way in which we are present to one another.

The word “communion” means literally union with. It is not by chance that it has come to be the word we use to describe what is involved in receiving the eucharistic bread. This use of the word goes back to St Paul. “The bread that we break,” he once asked, “is it not a sharing, a communion, in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”

Church and Eucharist are inseparable. The church, in its liturgy, makes the Eucharist, brings it into our midst; the Eucharist, on the other hand, makes the Church, builds it up, draws us out of isolation into community. Our communion, our union, is with Christ and with one another. Both things will be brought to fulfillment beyond this life in the eternal banquet which is the kingdom of God.