

Twenty-eighth Sunday Ordinary Time A: 10.11.2020

Prepare Ye the way of the Lord... and don't forget to check your 'wedding garment!'

Over forty years ago, two musicals – or, 'rock operas,' as they were billed – hit New York in the year 1971, both dealing with the Gospel of Our Lord, Jesus Christ. Both, also, were transformed into films and became box-office hits. The names of those musicals? *Jesus Christ Superstar*, by Messers Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber, and *Godspell*, by Stephen Swartz and John-Michael Telebak. Even in the liberal mores of that time, the musicals hit the world with a bang. What I always found rather interesting, however, was the first song of the second musical, *Godspell*.

Rather, let me be more specific. What was so interesting about that first song was not the music, which was typically modern and nothing out-of-character (musically speaking) for the times, but the words which were not *in character*, so to speak. The first song was taken directly from the King James translation of the Scripture: *"Prepare ye the way of the Lord!"* (St. Matthew 3. 3) These words are, of course, the words of St. John the Baptist, calling the People of Israel to prepare for the coming of the Messiah, the Saviour, Jesus Our Lord, Who will shortly come to be baptized, in order to begin His ministry. However, I must say I always thought it rather funny, rather charming, that this so-called radical, rock-opera began with sixteenth century English.

In today's Holy Gospel, we have what seems to be a rather strange story, don't we? But, as we begin to meditate on this Gospel passage, let me just point out that if you will keep the call of St. John the Baptist *"Prepare ye the way of the Lord!"* in the back of your minds, your understanding of this Gospel will be greatly assisted.

Would it also help to point out that, from the earliest times of the Old Testament to the time of Jesus and all throughout the New Testament, one of the signs of the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God, or, in short, Heaven, is the symbol of a *banquet*? That Heavenly banquet is well described in our first reading, taken from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah:

On this mountain the Lord of Hosts will provide for all peoples a feast (or banquet) of rich food and choice wines...(Isaiah 25. 6)

In the minds and hearts of our ancient Jewish fathers, the *mountain*, that high-up place shrouded in cloud and smoke was a place touched by God Himself, where He, if He so chose, could converse with man (as He did with Moses, when He gave to him the Ten Commandments). Paradoxically, the *mountain* could also be a place of sin, as well. Why? Because the *mountain*, with its covering of cloud, was also covered with trees and undergrowth. And, because of that undergrowth, frequently pagan rituals were held there, rituals that were forbidden by the Lord God. Each man and each woman were called to choose which God they would serve – this is the choice of every man, from Adam and Eve until this very day. We can either *"look up unto the mountains, whence cometh our help,"* and in doing so discover that our *"help is in the Name of the Lord, Who made Heaven and earth!"* (Psalm 121. 1), or, in difficult times, we can gaze elsewhere, looking for cheap and easy escapes, in comfort, money, sinful pleasures, which, in the end, leave us emptier than we were when we began our search for meaning.

If we are brave, or, better yet, if we are child-like enough to admit that only the Lord can sustain us, then, in gazing at the *mountain of the Lord*, then we shall in time discover that, indeed, the Lord has prepared for us *"a feast of rich food and choice wines, juicy, rich food and pure, choice wines."* (Isaiah 25. 6)

But, you ask, where is this *mountain of the Lord*? May I once again remind you to gaze at the altar in front of you, and, note!, the altar is elevated, in each of our churches: the altar of sacrifice is elevated by one or two stairs; and then, the Tabernacle is also elevated, again, by one or two stairs. Many people, I'm afraid, have simply thought that the 'elevation' of the altars was simply a matter of convenience, to make everyone able to 'see what was going on' more easily. Indeed, no! The elevation of the altars is **intended** for a reason: in gazing at the altars, we are reminded that we are ascending the Mountain of the Lord.

In our Gospel passage today, a King (Who might that King be, I wonder?) decides to prepare a *wedding feast* for His Son... Have you forgotten the doctrine of the Mystical Body, taught to us by St. Paul, and, from him, taught to us unceasingly through the Fathers of the Church and the Popes? Jesus is the Son Who is wedded to His Church (cf., among others, Ephesians 5). The wedding guests are invited, but do not respond. We do not know why they will not come. A second invitation is given, and, again the servants are ignored, but, this time, some of the servants are killed. Like the Gospel of last week, Jesus is re-playing for His listeners the history of the people of Israel with their Lord... how many prophets were sent to Israel, how many were heeded, how many were ignored, and how many were even killed? *"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, thou that stonest them that were sent unto to Thee. How often would I have gathered Thy children unto Me... but Thou didst refuse Me!"* (St. Matthew 23. 37) Do you see how these words of Jesus are the exact fulfillment of all the hopes and all the sorrows of God's Messiah?

Finally, the King commands His servants to *"[g]o out... into the highways; and as many as you shall find, call to the marriage."* (St. Matthew 22. 9, Douay Version) Do you remember me speaking to you, a few weeks ago, that *everyone, all men (!)*, are invited to the Kingdom of Heaven, which, in this world, is His holy, Catholic Church? And do you remember, just two weeks ago, the warning in the Gospel that: *"Amen, I say unto you, the tax collectors and the harlots are entering the Kingdom of God before you. When John came to you in the way of righteousness, you did not believe him; but the tax collectors and the harlots did. Yet, even when that you saw, you did not later change your minds and believe him!"* (St. Matthew 21. 31-32)

God's Word in Scripture is transparently clear regarding the point being made: all men are invited to salvation – all people, all men of good will. Period! But, there is another point of equal importance that must be stressed, and that point is what brings us back to today's Gospel...

The King is greeting His guests, and note, the guests are described in the Gospel as *"bad and good alike."* (St. Matthew 22. 10) **So, you see, I meant what I said when I said that we must never forget that we are sinners; Jesus came to call sinners; if we are not sinners, then, where shall we be when Jesus comes to look for us? And! That**

is why we say, before receiving Our Lord in Holy Communion: “Domine, non sum dignus:” “Lord, I am not worthy...” I’ve often wondered, just how many people really believe that they aren’t worthy?

In any event, the King meets a man not properly dressed, a man without a ‘*wedding garment.*’ Oriental custom of Jesus’ time, and our customs of today as well, demand that someone attending a wedding ceremony or any ceremony of importance wear a special garment. The garment doesn’t need to be terribly costly, but it must be tasteful, modest and, obviously, one that is ‘*set aside,*’ that is, used only for special occasions. To come without the *wedding garment* is to offer an insult to one’s host. Is this a strange custom to us today? Would you not be insulted if someone came to an important dinner, to a wedding or a funeral, dressed, for instance, as if they were going to play at the beach? The *wedding garment* is, no more, no less, the outward sign of inner love and respect.

When I began this article, I mentioned two musicals from the 1970s that were and still are very popular; my favourite of the two is *Godspell*. However, let me hasten to point out that, though I like much of the music and *some of Godspell’s* message, I don’t buy it all. Part of the agenda of those musicals, was a contempt for society’s so-called over-concern for manners, respect for one’s elders, etc. The idea was put forth that what one wore didn’t matter; rather, what was in one’s heart was the only thing that really mattered. Perhaps the apex of this ideology was the line taken from Erich Segal’s *Love Story* (1970): “Love means never having to say you’re sorry.” That sounds lovely, and terribly romantic; it’s also a bunch of hogwash. True love, the love that is explained to us by St. Paul in his First letter to the Corinthians (chapter 13), means that we will probably have to say “I’m sorry” an awfully lot of the time. A simple gaze at the Crucifix ought to prove that point.

And there is one last point, perhaps the most important point of all that needs to be made regarding the *wedding garment*. To come to the *banquet* that the King prepared in the Gospel of St. Matthew, in which *both bad and good* were invited, demanded, with the putting on of the *wedding garment*, preparation for the feast. What do I mean by that?

Very simply, since the *wedding banquet* described in the Gospel is not only a symbol of Heaven, but also a symbol of the Mass which is enacted by Our Lord’s Passion, Death and Resurrection, we are given a hint by Jesus that He expects us – since entrance into the banquet is so easy – to *prepare ourselves* to enter that banquet carefully, not slovenly, like the man without the *garment*.

Put very simply, when was the last time anyone heard a homily on *preparing* for Holy Mass, not to mention, after Mass, making a brief thanksgiving, praying at least one Our Father, one Hail Mary, and one Glory be? Not to be trite, but, do we not teach our little children to say ‘thank-you’ at the end of a meal? Ought we not say thank-You to One Who remains with us, in the Tabernacle, day and night, whether we remember Him or not?

I have a sad memory, as a young priest, of my pastor asking me if I remembered that I was to say (*pray?!*) Mass in about seven minutes – I was scheduled to say the 8.00 A.M. Mass that day. I wasn’t quite finished with my morning coffee, and, in those years, I certainly was anything but a morning person. That priest had also been my pastor as a child. I told him that “I’ll get there in time, don’t worry!” I can still see the hurt look in his eyes, because, I remember the example he showed me as a pastor when I was young, always making a holy hour, or, at least, a holy half-hour before his morning Mass. I’m sorry to say, it took me a long time to learn that lesson. Strangely, however, when I *did* learn to come to church earlier, I discovered new meanings in the Scripture and in the Liturgy – meanings that I never found in any of my books, only from prayer. All the beautiful vestments in the world could not cover up the fact that, since I had made not preparation for the Lord (*“Prepare Ye the way of the Lord*) my *wedding garments* were far from pleasing to Jesus; they were, in fact, tattered and torn.

So, what can we learn from the man who forgot to prepare his *wedding garments*? Start simply but prudently. Can you come five or ten minutes earlier for Holy Mass, and come as quietly as possible? (I realize those of you with little ones may find this impossible... but wait, in years to come, it *will* be possible – of course, then your hearts will mourn the loss of the noise and excitement....) And, after Mass has finished, at least say thank-You to Him Who has poured Himself out for us. An Our Father, a Hail Mary, and one Glory be is sufficient; if the Lord gives you a better idea, go for it! But – *prepare your garments!*

I leave you with the words of a great Eucharistic saint, Fr. Peter J. Eymard:

It is our Lord’s desire to communicate Himself to us as abundantly as possible. But each one receives Him **according to his capacity and preparation.** To the soul that is well prepared, He gives a strength of life, a generous resolution that causes it to vow eternal fidelity to its Spouse.... To a soul so finely attuned Jesus Christ gives... the grace of self-forgetfulness and entire self-surrender. A soul that receives Communion must come to the point of loving our Lord for Himself, must be able to give itself without asking what it will receive in return. He loves little who demands a recompense for everything he does. (1, emphasis my own)

Thus... “*Prepare Ye the way of the Lord...*” but prepare your *wedding garments*, too!

1. St. Peter J. Eymard, *Holy Communion*, from *The Eymard Library*, vol. 2 of 9, Emmanuel Publishing, Cleveland, Ohio, 1938, pg. 147