

Fourth Sunday of Lent – Year C
Fr. Chad S. Green
Holy Family Catholic Church
Kirkland, Washington
31 March 2019

Laetare Sunday
Joshua 5:9a, 10-12
Psalm 34
2 Corinthians 5:17-21
(Luke 15:18) Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

The Heavenly Banquet

Today is Laetare Sunday! One of two Sundays each year that we that we celebrate in a distinct way with special rose-colored vestments that always stand out. The other Sunday being Gaudete Sunday in Advent. *Gaudete* and *Laetare* are both Latin words that mean: “Rejoice!” or “Be joyful!”¹

Why are we so joyful during the penitential season of Lent? We are joyful, frankly, because it’s almost over! Both Gaudete Sunday in Advent and Laetare Sunday in Lent come when we are just over halfway through each season. In each case, we celebrate in the midst of penance, as a preview of the greater celebration that is coming soon. It’s to help rejuvenate us; to hasten us forward to that day when our Lord comes to us in a new way.²

In Advent: we prepare to celebrate our Lord becoming human and coming into our world as a Baby. In Lent: we prepare to celebrate our Lord – not exactly coming *into* our world – but, rather, coming *back* into our world. For, on Good Friday, it appeared that He was gone from our world forever. Yet, on Easter Sunday, we celebrate the Good News that our Lord came back from death, rose again to new life, and thus made a way for us to also rise to eternal life and be invited to join Him in the Heavenly Banquet!³

+++

Each of our three Readings and the Psalm today have a celebratory aspect to them. As well, the themes of being fed by the Lord⁴; tasting and seeing His goodness⁵; and an invitation to join Him in a celebratory banquet.⁶

In the First Reading, from Joshua, the Israelites have crossed over the Jordan River, into the Promised Land.⁷ After four hundred years of Exile in Egypt; forty years of wandering and eating manna in the desert; they are, at last, enjoying a proper celebratory banquet in their homeland.

The Gospel presents us with the well-known and beloved Parable of the Lost Son – also known as the Prodigal Son. Just as Israel could enjoy a celebratory banquet from their Heavenly Father upon returning home after years of wandering astray; so, too, could the Lost Son enjoy a celebratory banquet from his Father upon his return home after years of wandering astray. There is a big celebration, but there is also a big question: *Who deserves to be invited to the celebratory banquet with the Father?*

Just when our hearts are warmed by the welcome the Lost Son has received from his Father. Just as the celebration has begun. The story takes a sudden sharp turn. We are confronted with the reality that not *everyone* has welcomed the Lost Son back. The older brother has refused to join a celebration that includes his younger brother.

By telling us this parable, our Lord provokes some important questions for us to consider for ourselves about the Heavenly Banquet that we are all hoping for and looking forward to:

Who do I think is worthy of being invited to the Banquet in Heaven?

Do I think *I'm* worthy?

Do I think my brother, sister, friend, neighbor, stranger, enemy is worthy?

Who do I think will be at the Heavenly Banquet?

Who do I think will *not* be at the Heavenly Banquet?

+++

I've been visiting each of the parish school classrooms the past few weeks, which is always a great joy for me. When I visit, the kids get to ask me questions. Questions about God, about me, about priesthood, about the Church, etc. Whatever they want. Our parish school

children are getting some outstanding formation in the faith. They always ask excellent questions. And, I never know what they're going to ask!

One of the students recently asked me: "How many people are going to go to Heaven?" Good question! A question that great theologians have wondered about and struggled with for centuries. I said, "We don't have a way to know that. Only God knows how many people are going to Heaven." Then I said, "But even if we don't know how many will go to Heaven, we can still hope and pray that all people go to Heaven. Don't you think so?" And she smiled and said, "Yes, I agree. I hope that all people get to go to Heaven!"⁸

This is a beautiful thought to have, but in the history of our faith, it has also been a controversial thought to have.⁹ From our human perspective, there remains a desire to reward good behavior and to punish bad behavior. It's difficult for us to imagine justice any other way. And it's impossible for us to truly have God's perspective on the whole situation. Just as it was difficult for the older brother to have the Father's perspective. To share the Father's joy and celebrate that his Lost Son had returned.

+++

Last Saturday we had our parish young adult day retreat at St. Mary-on-the-Lake in Bellevue. This same parable was the Gospel Reading for that Saturday's Mass. In the homily I told the young adults about how the telling of this parable was adapted and dramatized in the famous six-part television mini-series, *Jesus of Nazareth*, released in 1977.¹⁰ I was surprised that none of them had heard of it, which reminded me that I'm becoming less and less of a young adult! I hope that many or some of you have seen or heard of this series.

The setting I'm referring to is at the seashore in Capernaum. Peter and a few of the first Apostles are arguing with one another because of the news going around that their new Master,

Jesus, is planning to have dinner at Matthew the tax collector's home. They're worried because the Pharisees and others in town are talking about how "anyone who associates with [tax collectors] is as defiled as they are." So, the others are asking Peter to talk to Jesus about the scandal that this is going to cause. Peter screams at them, "I told him! ... But all Jesus would say [to me] is, 'Why don't you join us, as well?'"

In the next scene, as Jesus walks to Matthew's house, several people walk alongside Jesus complaining to Him, "Master! It's a scandal for you to eat with these people. Don't you know who they are?" "We've lived our lives honorably. Made sacrifices to keep the Law." "And now you sit and eat with such people." "If you go and eat with these people, they will contaminate you. The whole town will abandon you." "You can't go!" [These objections sound very similar to the Pharisees and scribes in the introduction to today's Gospel, as well as to the complaints of the older brother to his Father.¹¹]

As Jesus enters the home, the righteous and clean people stay on the outside, refusing to enter the banquet along with our Lord. It's a striking juxtaposition, with all of the righteous and clean crowded around the open door so that they can clearly see into the banquet – but refusing to cross the line of the threshold to enter for themselves.

It's amidst this scene that Jesus begins the parable, "I'd like to tell you a story. A certain man had two sons..." As Jesus tells the parable, the raucous banquet becomes quiet and focused on Him. The camera alternates between Matthew in the banquet, and Peter, at the door, refusing to enter. Jesus concludes the parable, "...it is right to celebrate. Your brother was dead, and he is alive again! He was lost, and is found!"

There is complete silence in the banquet as Peter crosses the threshold and enters the banquet. He faces Jesus and says: “Forgive me, Master. I’m...I’m just a stupid man.”¹² Then he embraces Matthew.

The telling of this parable was a breakthrough for Peter. It required Peter to have a change of heart before continuing to follow Jesus. Ultimately, a change of heart before he could enter the Banquet.

+++

Which brings us back to the big question: *Who deserves to be invited to the Heavenly Banquet with the Father?*

The answer is that, because of the Father’s Mercy¹³, because of Jesus’ Sacrifice on the Cross¹⁴, all of us have been redeemed and are invited to enjoy the Heavenly Banquet with the Father. There is no human person – whether sinful or virtuous; contrite or righteous – who has not been extended the invitation.

There are, however, two conditions for entering the Banquet:

One, accepting the Father’s Mercy for yourself.¹⁵

And, two, accepting everybody else that the Father has also invited.¹⁶

¹ Entrance Antiphon for Gaudete Sunday (Third Sunday of Advent): “Rejoice (*Gaudete*) in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice (*gaudete*). Indeed, the Lord is near.” (Philippians 4:4-5)

Entrance Antiphon for Laetare Sunday (Fourth Sunday of Lent): “Rejoice (*Laetare*), Jerusalem, and all who love her. Be joyful (*gaudete cum laetitia*), all who were in mourning; exult and be satisfied at her consoling breast.” (Cf. Isaiah 66:10-11)

² From the Collect (Opening Prayer) for Laetare Sunday (Fourth Sunday of Lent): “...grant, we pray, that with prompt devotion and eager faith the Christian people may hasten toward solemn celebrations to come.”

³ See Matthew 22:1-14, esp. 22:2: “The kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son.”

See also:

Isaiah 25:6: “On this mountain the LORD of hosts will provide for all peoples. A feast of rich food and choice wines, juicy, rich food and pure, choice wines.”

Matthew 8:11: “I say to you, many will come from the east and the west, and will recline with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the banquet in the kingdom of heaven...”

Luke 14:15-24, esp. 14:16: “A man gave a great dinner to which he invited many.”

⁴ Joshua 5:11-12

⁵ Psalm 34:9a: “Taste and see that the LORD is good.”

⁶ Luke 15:23, 32

⁷ Joshua 3-4

⁸ See Intercessions for Ordinary Time Sunday Evening Prayer I of Week I: “Let every nation come into your kingdom, so that all people will be saved.”

⁹ For an example from recent history, refer to the controversy surrounding the publication of *Dare We Hope that All Men Be Saved? With a Short Discourse on Hell* by Hans Urs von Balthasar (1988).

¹⁰ Franco Zeffirelli, *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977)

¹¹ Luke 15:2, 29-30

¹² See Psalm 73:22: “I was stupid and could not understand; I was like a brute beast in your presence.”

¹³ Luke 6:36: “Be merciful, just as [also] your Father is merciful.”

Psalm 103:8: “Merciful and gracious is the LORD.”

¹⁴ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* 613: “Christ’s death is both the Paschal sacrifice that accomplishes the definitive redemption of men, through ‘the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world’, and the sacrifice of the New Covenant, which restores man to communion with God by reconciling him to God through the ‘blood of the covenant, which was poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’.”

¹⁵ Luke 15:20: the Lost Son returns to the Father and is welcomed into the Banquet

¹⁶ Luke 15:28, 32: the older brother must accept his brother in order to join the Banquet