

OPENING COLLECT

Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us your gift of faith that, forsaking what lies behind and reaching out to that which is before, we may run the way of your commandments and win the crown of everlasting joy; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 25.1-9

1 O LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. 2 For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the palace of aliens is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt. 3 Therefore strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you. 4 For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat. When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm, 5 the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place, you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds; the song of the ruthless was stilled. 6 On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear. 7 And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death for ever. 8 Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. 9 It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

This is, in many ways, a most extraordinary passage. It comes in what is usually called 'First Isaiah', that is chapters 1-39 of the great prophetic book, which is dated to the C.8th B.C. However, the whole feeling of this passage is considerably later. The prophet pictures the restoration of his people, but, although the focus is on Israel, this is now the time of salvation for **all** peoples (v.6). God, like a cloud has sheltered the poor and needy from 'the blast of the ruthless' and the hot 'noise of the aliens'. Now there will be a celebratory feast 'on the mountain', and the shroud of death will be destroyed. There will be no more tears, and no more disgrace. In wonderful poetry, the writer foresees the coming Day of the Lord, the day of salvation (v.9). This is clearly to be in the future and Christians, naturally, see this day as dawning with the coming of Jesus. Hence the appropriateness of reading this passage today, and recalling that Christians can see the Eucharist as a foretaste of the heavenly banquet to come!

SECOND READING: Philippians 4.1-9

1 My brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. 2 I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. 3 Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. 4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice .

A final passage from Philippians, which, happily, proves the point. Paul does not seem to be writing to those who were living in a physical Utopia, blessed materially and free from all ills. Instead, he writes to encourage those who are struggling to be steadfast in the faith, urging them to stand firm in the Lord. They are not to worry, but to trust God, and to live, walking the way that they have 'learned and received and heard and seen in me' (v.9).

Epistle continued:

5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 8 Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9 Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Gospel: Matthew 22.1-14

1 Once more Jesus spoke to the chief priests and Pharisees in parables, saying: 2 "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. 3 He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. 4 Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet." 5 But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, 6 while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. 7 The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. 8 Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 9 Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." 10 Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. 11 But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, 12 and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. 13 Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." 14 For many are called, but few are chosen.'

Both Matthew and Luke include versions of this parable. In brief, Luke's version (ch.14) puts a considerable emphasis on the excuses that the guests make (verse 5, here in Matthew), which allows them to put off going to the feast until they are ready. What Jesus seems to be saying in the Lucan version is that the Kingdom, symbolised by the feast, as we saw in Isaiah 25, cannot be treated in this way. Delay committing your life to God and you may miss the boat! Matthew is less concerned with that and emphasises instead the violent treatment of the servants of God by the guests, which brings forth revenge from the King. So, there is a typical Matthean emphasis on judgement, and, as last week's Gospel, it points to the People of God, who fail to recognize the significance of Jesus. That is surely why Matthew makes it a king's 'wedding feast' for his son. The parable is pointed at those who do not recognise the moment, which is heralded by the arrival of Jesus (cp. Luke 14). Scholars have always found the addition about the man not wearing a wedding robe difficult to handle, but it makes a useful point perhaps that coming to Jesus and the Kingdom is about a change of direction in your life, making a fresh start: new clothes for a new life?? (Metaphorically speaking, of course!)

Post-Communion Collect:

We praise and thank you, O Christ, for this sacred feast: for here we receive you, here the memory of your passion is renewed, here our minds are filled with grace, and here a pledge of future glory is given, when we shall feast at that table where you reign with all your saints for ever Amen.