

The wedding banquet in today's Gospel is that of Jesus, for he is the king's son, the bridegroom who is in love with the human race and who invites everyone to the banquet prepared by his Father. Jesus refers to himself as a bridegroom quite early in Matthew's Gospel and returns to this same image in his parable of the bridesmaids, half of whom were well prepared, with oil in their lamps ready to burn at the appropriate time, but the other half did nothing, only to find that they were too late to attend the wedding. The image of the wedding banquet is a daring one, highlighting the intimacy of love into which Jesus calls us.

John, the beloved disciple, saw this truth as so central to the gospel that he opens his account of the ministry of Jesus at a wedding banquet in Cana and the Book of Revelation reaches its climax in a magnificent scene in which Jesus, having been crucified but now victorious, takes his bride, redeemed humanity, to himself that they might enjoy forever the intimacy of love.

Jesus is continuing an image found in the Hebrew Scriptures which speak of God as a bridegroom offering his love to Israel. When the prophets looked forward to the time when the people and God would live in a consistent communion of love, they used the image of a banquet - a wedding feast. Today's Responsorial Psalm speaks of God preparing a banquet for us.

This Mass we are now celebrating is the banquet. This is, as we now say before communion "the Banquet of the Lamb", where we disciples of Jesus come together to hear Jesus speak words of love to us in the Liturgy of the Word, and give himself for us, and to us, in the Liturgy of the Eucharist.



In the Gospel those invited found excuses to stay away. They were too busy. They had other priorities. It was too much trouble. It is the same today. We can find all sorts of excuses for not coming to the Eucharist each and every Sunday. Today we are invited to stop and think what it is to which we are being invited. We are hungry and thirsty and God who loves us is drawing us into the closest union conceivable here on earth. Jesus, the Bridegroom of our souls wants to enter deep within us.

Everyone acknowledges how the Church needed reform in the sixteenth century. The way it happened, however, tore Western Christianity apart. Among other matters, the whole meaning of the Eucharist was called into question. In an attempt to protect people against the ravages of

erroneous teaching, the Church insisted on attending Mass under pain of mortal sin. This was a way of insisting on the seriousness of the obligation binding people to attend Mass on Sundays. To neglect attending Mass with the community when there was no real excuse was a sign of a breakdown of our relationship with God and with each other.

The Church still insists on the importance of attending Mass. It matters that we come to the wedding banquet and do not stay away. It matters for ourselves personally and it matters for the community. We need love – we need God's love and, as Jesus said: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states: "The faithful are obliged to participate in the Eucharist on days of obligation, unless excused for a serious reason. Those who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin"(n.2181). The Catechism goes on to say (n.1380), quoting Pope John-Paul II: "The Church and the world have a great need for Eucharistic worship. Jesus awaits us in this sacrament of love. Let us not refuse the time to go to meet him in adoration, in contemplation full of faith, and open to making amends for the serious offences and crimes of the world. Let our adoration never cease".

To stay away from Mass except for a very good reason is to act like those in the Gospel today who found trivial excuses for staying away from the wedding banquet.

As incredible as it may seem, some people turn down the invitation to attend the banquet. They either ignore it completely or become so involved in their own concerns they have no time for it.

This is the case not only in the parable but also in our world today. An invitation to the banquet that we celebrate at each Sunday Mass does not seem to be as attractive as a sports event, the latest movie, or some social affair or just getting a couple extra hours of sleep. And so we send our regrets: I cannot come.

What a shame! We seem to have forgotten that everything is tending toward the end; life itself is moving toward the time of the eternal banquet. All of our plans, all of our interests, all of our distractions will cease. Only the eternal banquet will remain. Will we have turned down the invitation to attend?

Even when we decide to attend our Sunday celebration, it must be done with full and active participation. We need to pray aloud together, we need to lift our voices aloud together in song, and we need to participate in this festal celebration of the liturgy fully with body, mind and heart.

It is not just enough to turn up at the wedding banquet. It is an invitation to love. When we come, we are committing ourselves to respond to the love of Jesus and to bear the fruits of this love in our lives. That is the meaning of wearing the marriage garment that we hear in the gospel today. Jesus invites us to attend Mass every week and receive him in the Eucharist and then strive to become what we have received by living lives of holiness, love and charity.

This weekend we celebrate the civil holiday of "Thanksgiving", where we give thanks to God for all his gifts and blessings especially the bountiful harvest of the earth that will feed us through the cold, dark winter ahead.

The very word Eucharist means “thanksgiving” and we are invited to come together to give thanks, not just on one weekend in the fall, but each and every weekend of the year. We come together to this banquet to give thanks, and we depart from here to take all the rich fare we have received at this banquet to share with those at home, in our work place, and to all those in need throughout the world. That rich fare is the love of Jesus.