THE PARABLE OF THE GREAT DINNER St Luke 14: 16-24

The Gospel passage of the Great Dinner from St Luke chapter 14 which we have just heard concludes a section in which Jesus has been invited to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat dinner on the Sabbath. We are told that they, the Pharisees, were watching him closely, particularly as the Lord has noticed a man present suffering from dropsy. He turns to those present and asks them if it is lawful to cure people on the Sabbath. There is no answer to the question except ominous silence and Jesus goes ahead, heals him and sends him away, commenting that if any of the people present had a child or even an ox that had fallen into a well on the Sabbath, they would certainly pull him or it out.

Next he gives a lesson on humility as he notices how people jostle for positions of honour at this important dinner. He recommends that people choose the lowest seat as they could well be raised rather than the highest as they could well be disgraced if asked to move down. He sums up his argument with the dictum, “All who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted”. And then he gives a lesson on charity and generosity, telling people not to invite friends, family, relatives and rich neighbours as they will simply return the gesture but rather the lame, the blind, the crippled, the poor as they cannot return the invitation. The repayment for this act of kindness will come at the resurrection of the righteous. A guest echoes these sentiments by saying, “Happy is he who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God”. This statement triggers the telling of the parable of the Great Dinner. So we must assume the dinner is the Feast of the Kingdom. In a few minutes we shall have a foretaste of that banquet in the Divine Liturgy when we receive Christ in the bread and the wine.

Those who are invited in the parable must be those who are close to the host since the setting is one of familiarity and we must assume that in the historical context this can only refer to Israel. In the preceding chapter the Lord states unequivocally that many of those who ate and drank with the house owner (the God of Israel) will not be recognised by him and the door will be shut to them as evildoers. “The people honour me with their lips but their hearts are far from me,” are the words of the prophet Isaiah, which are a prevailing theme in Lent. Christ considers the excuses which Israel and we too make for not honouring God and on first appearances they are all reasonable: one has bought land, another has bought cattle and a third has just married. In short, the excuses are possessions, work and emotional matters. All matters which are typical concerns of humanity but potential obstructions, which can preoccupy us and divert us in the spiritual life individually and collectively from ‘the one thing needful’. We lose our focus on Christ, our peace and our closeness to him.

And we are told that the householder is in a rage and gives instructions to his servant to bring in those who are defective and lacking in some way: the poor, blind, crippled and lame who are willing to come. In the previous chapter we are told that people will come from east and west from north and south and will eat in the Kingdom of God. As Orthodox who are taught that we have ‘right belief’ we must be careful not to take our heritage for granted but remain humble. This can and is being taken away from us as Christ reminds us. “Some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last”.

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But the most wonderfully inspiring part of this story is the conclusion, the endless love of God. “Your orders have been carried out and there is still room,” says the servant. The master replies, “Go to the open roads and hedgerows and force people to come in to make sure my house is full”. That is, bring in anyone who wants to come regardless of race, social standing, gender, intellectual or spiritual capacity or achievements – simply those who wish to come.

This part echoes another parable, that of the man who goes out to hire labourers to work in his vineyard and even goes out at the eleventh hour to employ those who have no work, offering them the same terms as those who have been working from the beginning of the day. In the sermon of St John Chrysostom at Easter we have the same concern for those who have not prepared themselves for the Feast of Christ’s resurrection from the dead but are simply urged to join the feast.

Today we are celebrating the Forefathers or ancestors of Christ as we always do at this time of year. We can read the list at the beginning of St Matthew’s gospel and it is interesting. There are some famous names among them: not only the Patriarch Abraham and his immediate descendants, Isaac and Jacob but also the prophetess Ruth, who is not of the House of Israel but a Moabitess, and King David and his son Solomon from the wife of Uriah the Hittite. The list gives us a real sense of history and how God dealt with his people over several thousand years and continues to do so. Often the writers of the Old Testament historical books pass a very black and white judgement on a ruler of Israel or Judah with a terse statement “he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord” i.e. he was bad or “he did what was right in the sight of the Lord” i.e. he was good. We could take this approach to today’s parable, which is not just an edifying story but a historical fact about to take place in the future and already taking place now (as I said the Divine Liturgy prefigures this dinner which is destined to take place at some stage in the future when the Father decides) and we could apply it to the parable and ourselves.

The Great Dinner cannot be cancelled or moved to another date as is convenient for us. The dinner must take place and we who are called to it are divided into those who are ready and those who are not. The preparation at a spiritual level is our responsibility, nobody else’s, and fasts like the one we are currently observing are there to help us keep our hearts and minds focused and detached from worldly matters though we have to deal with them in abundance. An approach to life is required of us as is well expressed in the words of St Philaret, Patriarch of Moscow. “Teach me to treat all that comes to me throughout the day with peace of soul and with firm conviction that your will governs all.” This is a readiness that accepts all that God gives as his will for us.

May God grant us to take something from this parable and from consideration of the ancestors of Christ whom we celebrate today to give glory to the God of history who has acted since the beginning of the world and who will return to us one day when through his great love and mercy we too shall be ready to participate in his Great Banquet of the Kingdom.

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