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

Today’s parable is told by Christ at a dinner given by a Pharisee and follows on directly in the text from two injunctions of the Lord in the context of dinners. One is about humility and the advice to seek a lower place rather than a higher one at such events to avoid the shame of being told to move down but to be honoured by being urged to move up higher. The words of Christ are familiar to us. “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The second is directly about concern for those less fortunate than us in the context of hospitality. It is important to invite those who cannot repay by returning the gesture. “Invite the poor, crippled, lame and blind. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” This is a poignant reminder also of the need to give generously during the Advent Fast when we are collecting for a war-torn country in East Africa where yet another country, Tigray, has seceded from Ethiopia and is involved in a bloody fight with its neighbour Eritrea. As ever it is innocent civilians who bear the brunt of the suffering as you can see on television.

One of the guests prompted by the Lord’s words suddenly exclaims, “Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God”. And this leads to the telling of the parable of the Great Dinner which has been prepared and is an image of the Kingdom awaiting us both now and at the end of the age. “Come for everything is ready now” is the announcement. This statement suggests that the guests knew that the dinner was in preparation and have not put this down in their diaries as an important date and made themselves ready. They are all preoccupied with material or emotional concerns of one kind or another. Perhaps the only person who has a reasonable excuse is the man who has got married since the Mosaic Law exempts him from military service for a year after marriage in order to spend time with his new wife and perhaps start a family. But unfortunately this exemption clearly does not apply here as there is no war. None of the guests is ready for the heavenly banquet, which we must suppose to be the coming of the Messiah. The guests are the people of Israel for whom Christ has come in the first place but who are not prepared. He is in the house of a ruler, a Pharisee, and earlier he has healed a man with dropsy on the Sabbath which has enraged these people and the scribes in his audience.

The dinner cannot be postponed as it is in the divine plan, so if the invited guests cannot attend, others will have to take their place. In this case it is the social outcasts, the poor, crippled, lame and blind representing no doubt the Gentiles, those outside Israel, but are ready to receive the Lord. There are many examples in the gospels of those who have faith: the centurion, who describes himself as unworthy to have the Lord in his house, the Canaanite woman, the woman at Jacob’s well who has had five husbands, Cornelius in the Acts of the Apostles. These are the people who, St Paul says, “have been chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world”. The plan is perfect, its timing perfect too, though it comes at one of the most turbulent times in the history of Israel when the country is occupied by one of the most powerful empires in world history, that of Rome.

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Another interesting aspect of the story is the immensity of God’s love for mankind. All the poor, crippled, lame etc are brought in and yet there is still room for more. “Go into the roads and lanes and compel people to come in so that my house may be filled.” The word ‘compel’ is significant here emphasising the urgency expressed by the Master to have the feast fully attended and is reminiscent of the Easter homily of St John Chrysostom and of the Lord’s parable about the men who are hired up to the closing hours of the day. Nobody is to be left out regardless of when they come except those who refuse the invitation. “None of those who were invited shall taste my banquet.”It also reminds us of the need to pray for the world that the light of Christ’s love may be known increasingly.

Today we are celebrating the Forefathers of Christ the Righteous of the Old Testament, as we always do at this time of year. There are many famous names among them: not only the Patriarch Abraham and his immediate descendants, Isaac and Jacob but also interesting people like the prophetess Ruth, who is not of the House of Israel but a Moabitess. who was ready to leave her people and return with her mistress Naomi to the town of Bethlehem. We read, “When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more”. This readiness is enjoined upon us by today’s parable. And then there is 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. 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.

May God grant us to take something from this parable and from consideration of the Holy Forefathers 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.

*12th December 2021 Oxford*