

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year A

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

First reading

(Isaiah 55.1-3)

Invitation to the Banquet

Our approach to God and to things divine has two contrasting aspects. On the one hand, we must be aware in awe of the splendor of God and of our own terrifying littleness; this engenders a hushed stillness in us.

On the other hand, there is joy and celebration of what God has given us. Particularly in Christianity this is a family and community joy, celebrating our oneness in Christ; the obvious way to celebrate this is a party with noise, food and drink.

The readings on this Sunday are all about joy and celebration, and the first and third about a party. Isaiah hands us an invitation to the party. The invitation has two particular notes. First, it is in similar terms to the biblical invitations from God's Wisdom to come and share the banquet prepared by Wisdom for those who wish to learn God's ways.

Second, it is a fulfilment of the tradition of the covenant dominating the Bible: God made an alliance, a special bond, with special promises to Abraham, renewed it and intensified it to Moses and again to David. When Israel shattered that covenant by constant rebellion, God promised a new covenant, ratified again at a party, at Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples.

Question:

Should the Eucharist be more obviously a joyful celebration?

Second reading:

(Romans 8.35, 37-40)

A Celebration of God's Love

This lively expression of delight and confidence really concludes and sums up the explanations of God's love for us, as it is manifested and given to us in the saving act of Jesus.

This has been the fullest explanation given by Paul of just how Christ saves us, and how we are made a new creation and now live by the Spirit of Christ. After that, the Letter to the Romans goes on to particular consequences and applications of this. There will be another such outbreak of joy from Paul which we read in three weeks' time (Romans 11.33-36). It is Paul at his best and most ardent.

First, just before our reading, comes a series of excited rhetorical questions: 'What can we add?', 'Can anyone condemn?', 'Are we not certain?' Then the expression of Paul's total confidence in God's saving love, from which nothing can cut us off. In the biblical mind, seven is the perfect number, signifying completion: Paul first gives seven hardships and trials that cannot cut us off, then seven hostile powers that are powerless against the love of God. The message is: there isn't anything that can separate us from the love of God.

Question:

If nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, is anyone in hell?

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Gospel:

(Matthew 14.13-21)

A Family Day Out with Jesus

Every mother knows the disaster situation of the family day out when the shops turn out to be closed and the emergency supplies were left at home. This lot have been three days on the trot, and there must have been nothing left at all. Jesus turns the disaster into a party for that huge crowd of people. Left to our own resources we are helpless, but Jesus can deal with that.

How many were there? We don't know, for the numbers are symbolic. In the Bible, '12' alerts us to the tribes of Israel. So, the 12 baskets of scraps show that the crowd is the 12 tribes of Jesus' new Israel. The way Jesus takes the bread and says the blessing must remind any Christian of the Eucharist.

So, this gigantic field party was a sort of Eucharist, Jesus at the centre of his people, entertaining them and cheering them. It probably wasn't very orderly. There would have been children enjoying the food and then running around and tripping up themselves and others as they sat on the grass. An African Mass is often like that, with lots of singing and dancing and celebration. That is why the Sunday Mass is so important: meet your friends and celebrate Christ together!

Question:

Would such a picnic-style Eucharist increase our understanding of what is going on?
