

Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA

Homily for the Twenty-Fourth Sunday of the Year
October 12, 2014 (Year A)

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Reflections on
Is. 25:6-10; Phil. 4:12-14, 19-20; Mt. 22: 1-14

Just under a year ago, a young woman in Minnesota named Michelle had her wedding all planned: the ballroom had been reserved months in advance, the menus were chosen, the flowers ordered, and the band hired. She was about to send out the invitations. Then her fiancé called to tell her he didn't want to marry her after all. So the wedding was canceled. But the arrangements were nonrefundable and had to be paid for.

I am sure Michelle was very disappointed that her hopes for her future life had been dashed, and that her family and friends could not celebrate with her, after all the time and effort she had expended on the party arrangements. What Michelle decided to do was donate the ballroom and everything that went with it to a local charity. This resulted in an early Halloween party for a group of disabled adults who were being helped to live as independently as possible. I hope Michelle came to the Halloween party and received some consolation from the joy of her unintended guests.

I was reminded of this news story when I saw today's readings, which all have to do with God planning a magnificent party, which some of the intended guests apparently did not fully appreciate.

Our first reading is from the book of Isaiah, whose words were recorded over a period of more than 200 years. The original Isaiah lived in Jerusalem in the 700s BC. This Isaiah had disciples who carried on his tradition into very different social and political conditions. "Sec-

ond Isaiah," the one we associate with soaring poetry and words of comfort, wrote from exile in Babylon in the 500s, almost 200 years later. This is the prophet who envisioned Yahweh returning back to Jerusalem on roads that are made straight before him, with the mountains laid low and the valleys lifted up; this Isaiah said Israel would become a light to the nations; and he issued a call to "come to the waters, all you who are thirsty; come and eat . . . without money."

In the same spirit, today's reading promises a great feast, to mark the establishment of God's reign on Mt. Zion, in Jerusalem. Second Isaiah's hopes are high: you heard how much there will be to celebrate – the lifting of the veil of mourning, the wiping away of tears, the destruction of death. You heard to whom the invitation was given: *God will prepare for all peoples a banquet*. And it is a luxurious, rich feast, with juicy food, and fine wines – clearly meant to whet the appetite! Who would not want to come to such a feast?

Jesus opens his ministry with the joyful message that the reign of God was near. Surely, that is a cause for a great celebration, a great feast. Why would anyone refuse this invitation? That is the question that Jesus addresses in today's parable. And that his followers in the early church took to heart, each community in its own way.

But before we get to the New Testament, we should acknowledge that Isaiah's prophetic words were not fully accepted even in Jerusa-

lem. For some factions in the city, the catch would have been the phrase “for all peoples.”

All peoples? Really? When the returning exiles tried to re-establish Jewish life as they envisioned it, they looked down on their co-religionists who had remained in Judea, instead of being forced into exile: these were probably the poor, the peasants and manual laborers, people who were not learned or powerful enough to pose a threat to the new Babylonian regime. The returnees accused them of infidelity and impurity; most famously, as the Book of Ezra tells us, they ordered them to get rid of their “foreign wives.” And when worshippers of Yahweh came down from the northern town of Samaria to see if they could make common cause with the returnees, they were rebuffed, hardening the divisions between the Jews of Judea and the Samaritans.

It is an age-old problem, isn’t it? People in all sincerity want to maintain their roots, to stay faithful to the traditions of their ancestors. But what are the core values of the tradition, the ones that give a people its bedrock identity? What is negotiable, and what isn’t? We live in a changing world and face new realities. Second Isaiah came back from Babylon with a much expanded view of God’s work in the world, but others clung fiercely to the practices and the ideas they had received from their parents and grandparents; they were not open to new experiences that could have led them to new truths about themselves and about other people. Could God have been doing something different, calling them to something new? Second Isaiah said yes, but others didn’t see it that way.

It is not easy for any individual or social group to negotiate this tension between fidelity to one’s roots and openness to new perspectives. To pick an obvious example, what does it mean when we claim that our Church of the Beatitudes offers “a new way to be Catholic”? That was very much the same dilemma that Matthew’s community was in.

Isaiah’s image of a great feast to inaugurate the reign of God obviously had a lot of reso-

nance for Jesus. It expresses the joy and the promise of abundant life for all. But the reality, when Jesus began to preach about the reign of God, was that a lot of people weren’t interested, or didn’t believe, in God’s invitation!

Several versions of Jesus’s parable have come down to us. I imagine that he told it numerous times, to different audiences at different times, perhaps varying it for different situations. The story must also have been heard and remembered differently by different communities, because the tone and many of the details vary from one account to the other.

Matthew’s version is in some ways the closest to the idea of Isaiah’s feast, because it is a celebration put on by a reigning monarch, inviting friends and supporters to share in the joy of his heir’s wedding. But the intended guests beg off. Why?

Matthew chooses to tell this story in a way that highlights one of the most painful issues facing his community: the rejection of Jesus and his followers by the religious establishment in Jerusalem. It is told late in his gospel: Jesus is already in Jerusalem, having entered the city on what we now call “Palm Sunday.” He had immediately gone to the temple, where he drove out the money changers. So there is a lot of tension in the air (as you may remember from last week’s gospel reading about the evil tenants in the vineyard). Jesus and the religious establishment are at loggerheads.

The story doesn’t have to be told that way. Luke places the story earlier in his gospel. The host is simply a “rich man,” not a monarch. The invited guests make several excuses for not attending: one person wants to inspect a recently purchased field, another has a new yoke of oxen, and a third is getting married. So the rich man opens up the banquet to “the poor, the maimed, the blind, and the lame.” Luke’s story is more like Michelle’s wedding: the good news is that God’s care extends to those most in need, those who are most likely to appreciate it.

There is also a version in the Gospel of Thomas, one of those non-canonical gospels

that was dug up from the Egyptian desert. In this version the host is throwing a party to honor some visitors. As in Luke's gospel, the invitees have loads of excuses, mainly related to their commercial interests. One is about to press claims against some merchants; another has just bought a house; a third is getting married; and a fourth has bought a farm and wants to collect his rent. The story ends with this sobering note: "businessmen and merchants will not enter the places of my Father." We do not know the concrete social situation of this church community, so I leave it to your imagination!

To return to the version in Matthew's gospel: There is clearly a deep wound affecting his church community, the majority of whose members are of Jewish background. They want to assert their fidelity to Jewish tradition, but, as followers of Jesus, they see their Jewish faith in a new way. That is why, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus insists that *I have come not to abolish the law (the Torah), but to fulfill it*. The members of Matthew's church have found a new way to be Jewish (just as we have found a new way to be Catholic), and one they think is more authentic! It is enormously painful to them that their own religious authorities have Jesus put on trial and executed. Moreover, they fear persecution at the hands of the Jewish leaders of their own time, who are struggling to re-vision Jewish identity after the destruction of their temple in 70 AD.

This tumultuous historical context helps explain some of the more disturbing details in Matthew's account. The words about the intended guests who mistreat, and even kill, the king's servants are aimed squarely at the Jewish religious establishment, those Jesus contended with in his lifetime, and also those Matthew's community fears in their own era.

At the same time, Matthew worries about the quality and loyalties of those who have joined his church. You just heard that the servants in the parable collect *everyone they met,*

good and bad alike. Everyone is invited in, but Matthew is worried about the sincerity and commitment of some church members. In the parable, someone comes in *without a wedding garment*. This is not a judgment about personal taste in clothing or about financial status; clothes are often used as metaphors for attitudes and dispositions (think of Paul's words about "clothing oneself with Christ," or "putting on the armor of light"). Matthew fears that some people may have come in with no intention of celebrating the reign of God; perhaps we could see this party crasher as an infiltrator, or a spy. Could that be why this person was bound hand and foot and thrown out into darkness?

The Catholic Church of the Beatitudes faces some of the same questions as Matthew's congregation. We claim to be faithful to the core values of Catholic tradition, while hoping to move the church forward. Our conviction that God is doing something new means that we depart from the current leadership of the church in some very significant ways. Happily, unlike Matthew's church, we are not under any threat of persecution. Dialog with the official church remains difficult, but we see some signs of progress and follow with interest Pope Francis's call for dialog and discussion at the Synod on the Family in Rome.

In light of today's readings, what can we say? That we firmly believe that God continues the work of bringing about a reign of justice and peace, and that God will lift the veil of mourning and wipe away every tear; that God's great feast of abundance, which we foreshadow in our own Eucharist, is for all people: Jews and Gentiles, women and men, the self-sufficient and the needy—especially the needy.

We resolve to hear God's invitation, and not allow ourselves to be distracted by consumerism or peer pressure. We have put on our wedding garments this evening, so that we can celebrate with each other and with our God.