

Our readings this morning are both challenge and consolation.

The consolation is found particularly in the first reading where the prophet Isaiah writes about a banquet to which all people are invited. The background is the Babylonian Captivity, where after being defeated by the Babylonians in 597 BC the vast majority of Jewish people were exiled to different parts of the Empire, - a fate suffered by many nations which could not withstand the political and military might of Babylon.

The result was immense distress and grief for the affected peoples, and Isaiah is convinced that God will not allow this to persist, but he is also convinced that God will not bring about change forcefully through yet another war and conquest. Instead, he sees God bringing people together peacefully for an immense banquet in which all are able to participate harmoniously, friends and former foes alike. In many ways, this feast is the image of the Eucharist, where peoples from every nation and persuasion are able to come together in worship, communion and harmony.

The Gospel picks up that image, and, first of all, places it in the context of that time where especially the leaders of Israel are portrayed as the invited guests, who at first accepted the invitation, but who then, when the time came for them to make their appearance, found excuses for their absence.

The king then sends out his servants into the crossroads as well as highways and byways to invite all they could find to come to the wedding and banquet. And they came, in their droves. For Jesus this meant the ordinary people of his day, including the tax-collectors and prostitutes who found their way to him, but for us, traditionally this has been explained as people from every nation on earth who have accepted Baptism, and came dressed in their new wedding garment. They fill the hall, enjoying themselves and the occasion.

It is at this point that Jesus introduces a puzzling and disturbing note. While all are gathered so cheerfully the king comes in and notices a guest not wearing a wedding garment, and questions him about how he managed

to get in without it. The man offers no explanation, and the king orders him to be thrown outside.

On the face of it that action appears to be most un-Christlike, and yet, because it makes part of the parable, it would appear that Jesus approves of this action.

Why? I'd like to use the response of one author I consulted on that question. He suggested an answer that may not be quite what the Evangelist intended, but that fits the context accurately. He wrote:

Like all of us on occasion, that careless gentleman smugly assured himself, "At least, I came", and then proceeded to ignore all the other proprieties of wedding celebrations. He felt justified because he did one thing properly. He wasn't trying to respond fully to the divine invitation. He was just trying to do a little bit better (but not much) than the other guests who had refused to come.

We hear similar responses around us, as for example, - the schoolboy who disrupted the classroom all day and was rude to the teacher: "At least I came to school and didn't play hookey."

The dishonest politician who was finally caught after 20 years of taking bribes: "At least I worked 8 hours a day and showed up for most meetings."

The self-righteous neighbour who never helped anyone, who never got involved in any cause: "At least I didn't interfere in anyone else's business."

The man who squandered a good portion of his pay on his own fancies and neglected his family: "At least I never beat my wife or abused the children."

The way they speak describes exactly what they were doing, - the least!

The point Jesus makes with this parable is that he doesn't invite us to the heavenly banquet so that we may dabble a little bit with divinity. He doesn't invite us to lukewarmness. He invites us all to wear our wedding garments with gusto, and dive into the God-experience with wild abandon.

That's the challenge we are expected to respond to!

