

Twenty Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time A - We are all invited to God's Feast of rich food and choice wines in His Kingdom

October 15, 2023.

Probably you have seen one of Pope Francis' favourite movie **Babette's Feast**, or at least have heard about it. As Pope Francis commented, it challenges us to look outside of ourselves and to see the beauty of God's joy and mercy. It is a movie about selfless service to others that may not always be in accord with our man-made "rules" and may upend our view of God's mercy. As Philippa, one of two sisters who hired her says to Babette at the end of the film, **"But this is not the end, Babette. In Paradise you will be the great artist God meant you to be. Oh, how you will enchant the angels!"** In it, an impoverished fine chef from Paris makes her way into a tiny Danish town where the religion of the area made people hard and cold to each other, afraid to enjoy or even to relate to one another. Babette, the cook, had only a small stash of possessions, but she was a top chef. So she prepared, over many days, a huge, delectable, exquisite feast, serving after serving, all for the uptight townspeople. As they began to taste and enjoy, they began also to communicate in kindness to each other. They even danced! Food is meant to be enjoyed, not refused. I have heard critics say that this movie promoted self-indulgence, and I do not endorse such a thing. But I do notice similarities to the huge feast we hear about in this Sunday's First Reading (Isaiah 25:6-10a). There we find the famous invitation from the Lord of Hosts, full of unstinting promise. **"A feast of rich food and choice wines,"** Isaiah says. A great feast just like the banquet in Babette's Feast. This Sunday's Gospel reading (Matthew 22:1-14) also has an expensive feed. The king gets his very best livestock fattened up, seasoned, readied for cooking, with invitations sent out. If you thought the people in Babette's town were reluctant, look what happened here. Some people refused outright to come. Others simply ignored the invitation as if it had not been given, and others "laid hold of his servants, mistreated them, and killed them." The king punished these and then invited in street people. Food is meant to be enjoyed, not refused. But with so many people starving in today's world, how dare we fatten ourselves up with rich food and every other kind of riches? Shouldn't we rather abstain and deny ourselves? Isn't the "First World" currently fattening itself on food far more lavish than the ancient world could ever have even imagined? Advertisements tell us we should luxuriate, should pamper ourselves, should not hold back. "Who says you can't have it all," they say. How are we to respond, we who try to be faithful to God and God's promises? Remember that Jesus feasted as well as fasted. He abstained from food for forty days at the beginning of his public ministry; but later on his words were, "the Son of Man came eating and drinking—and they said, 'Look, he is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners'" (Mt. 11:19). How would he have gotten such a reputation except by enjoying his times at meals with others? Which is it for us, then, fasting or feasting? I think the answer is simple yet difficult. I think we are meant to receive humbly and to give to others as well. The mistake is to adopt a stance of, on the one hand, only receiving (getting, grabbing) or on the other hand, only giving (denying oneself for the sake of the other). Sunday's readings invite us to come into the kingdom, to open up, to eat, to enjoy what is there. To receive as Jesus did. He went deep, accepting all things as coming from God's hand. When it was time to let go of it all—life, friends, peace, and possessions—he did that with love. Receive and give. Jesus wants us to receive his life and then give it out to the world.

In ancient Palestine, one of the social customs at wedding banquets was for the host to provide a festive garment for all the guests - it was almost like what a welcome gift is for modern parties. It could be something as simple as a coloured scarf or shawl. With all the guests wearing this garment, an atmosphere of unity and joy was created, and the special honour of the bride and bridegroom (who were wearing different garments), was emphasized. In the parable, after the banquet has begun, the king comes in to greet the guests. And lo and behold, he finds a guest without a wedding garment. There are only two possible reasons why a guest wouldn't have a wedding garment: either he sneaked in without being invited, or he didn't care about celebrating the wedding and just wanted to enjoy the food and drink while doing his own thing. In either case, such a guest is not a guest at all - he has no relationship to the bride and bridegroom, and he has no reason to be there. And so the king threw him out. When we try to follow Christ without accepting his will and the teaching of his Church, we are trying to get in to the wedding banquet while refusing to put on the wedding garment. The wedding garment is a symbol of a life in the footsteps of Christ. The question is how are we living that life. This is what so many public figures in

our generation are doing when they say that they are Catholic, but then support things that directly contradict God's plan for the human family. Christianity is not a self-help buffet where we can pick and choose according to personal preference; it's the revelation of God, and it requires humility, obedience, and trust.

The First Reading says that the Lord of hosts will provide a feast for his people, a feast of choice wines and rich and juicy food. No, we want to be healthy, attractive, fit and trim. Rich food is the kind that our culture warns us against and it cost a lot of money too. This is a grim and grinding picture of human life. *But it is not the Lord's picture.* We are made by him to be fed till we are full with the very best. The Lord himself will provide it for us in heaven, in the wedding supper of the Lamb. But, in this life too, the Lord feeds us with the best—and that is himself, in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. And so, as the First Reading shows us, we are not commanded to a life of grimness. We are called to feasting with joy. My family experienced a taste of that feasting joy, filled with love, laughter and unity after two hardworking days of moving us to our apartment in Edmonton. I imagine it could be similar to feasting in God's heavenly banquet after a long hard life on earth.

In this Sunday's Second Reading (1 Thessalonians 1:1-5b), **"I can do all things in him who strengthens me,"** through Christ! - Not through self-help techniques. Finding what our hearts desire requires believing in Jesus, leaning on Jesus, following Jesus, obeying Jesus, staying close to Jesus. Christianity is an ongoing adventure in which Jesus, the Good shepherd, takes the lead, using especially three things to guide us. First, the sacraments. These are our supernatural air, water, and food. But unlike sheep, which eat good grass simply out of instinct, Christians have to consciously choose to feed on the sacraments. That means frequent Communion and visits to the Eucharist, frequent and regular confession, and not being afraid of the sacrament of anointing. Second, Jesus guides us through the teaching of the Church. When we go for walks in the woods, many times we wander down what looks like a trail but is really a dead-end, and we have to retrace our steps, or we get lost. Official Church teaching on faith and morality is guaranteed by Christ to help us avoid spiritual dead-ends. We just have to take time to study and understand it. Third, Jesus guides and nourishes us through prayer. When we pray, our friendship with Christ grows. A Christian who doesn't pray is a contradiction in terms. If we really care about our friendship with Christ, we will care about learning to pray better, and making prayer a priority. As Pope Benedict XVI told the young people gathered in New York last spring (2008): "What matters most is that you develop your personal relationship with God. That relationship is expressed in prayer."

Brothers and sisters, the kingdom has been prepared, and it is coming. Jesus likened it to a wedding banquet to which the invited guests are summoned. Everyone is invited every day to follow God more closely and our response is the work of a life time. We must walk with one another and with Christ. In this way, we'll never face life alone. Of course, there are some who refuse to come. They prefer to remain mired in their oppressive attitudes, their discriminatory relationships with others, their violent approach to solving social problems. They prefer revenge to forgiveness. They prefer the superiority of some to the equality of all. They see victimization and blame the victims. They are the invited guests who are *unfit* to come. There are those others, however, whose love for God expresses itself in eagerness to do good for others. They are the ones who "live in the house of the Lord," preferring love, forgiveness and equality. They will welcome the coming of the kingdom with the cry: **"let us rejoice and be glad that God has saved us!"** Christians cannot yearn for anything more ardently than to serve the men of the modern world ever more generously and effectively. Therefore, holding faithfully to the gospel and benefiting from its resources, and united with every man who loves and practices justice, Christians have shouldered a gigantic task demanding fulfillment in this world. Concerning this task they must give a reckoning to him who will judge every [person] on the last day. (Vatican II, Constitution on the Church in the Modern World , 1965: paragraph 93)