

Homily for The Twenty Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)(11/10/20)

And still they come, these parables. After the story of the vineyard stolen by the tenants that we heard last week, the chief priests and the scribes were so angry and felt so threatened that they wanted to lay hands on Jesus, but they could not do so because the people were loving what they heard. All of this hostility from the religious leaders must have been tangible, it must have been crackling in the air all around the Lord, but he answers them with one more parable – this will be the last before the Pharisees decide that they have heard enough and melt away to plot how to destroy him. The Lord has taught in parables; the Pharisees have become more and more obviously angry, resentful and hate-filled; now he answers them, he responds to all that hate and anger, by telling them a parable about joy; it is a story about rejoicing, and wonder, and delight – and about how it is that people sometimes choose to shut themselves away from joy. The message is clear: we can become so fixated on the things that threaten us and unsettle us, so defensive and obsessed with preserving things as we think they ought to be, that we shut ourselves out from joy. No wonder the Pharisees disappear to plot a murder: Jesus has seen through them and laid bare the tragic refusal to enter into joy that has imprisoned them.

What does this story tell us about the possibility of shutting ourselves out from joy and celebration? Does it open our eyes a little to the possibility that there is more wonder and delight out there than we are able to see? It would be tragic if, like the Pharisees, and the ungrateful wedding guests, we trapped ourselves in drudgery when there is a celebration on offer.

This is a story about a king. His son is to be married, which is very exciting. It is not just any old wedding, it is the wedding of the son of the king, so it is overlaid with expectations of national rejoicing, as well as hope for the future of the kingdom. It doesn't get much better than this. The guests are lined up to share in the rejoicing: the rejoicing of the king, the rejoicing of his son, the rejoicing of the nation. But, almost inexplicably, they turn away. They would rather spend a day at work than join in a day of joy. It seems almost absurd at first, but the parables are always given to us to shake us up a little and disturb us, so it does ask us the rather scary question: might there be some ways in which I do this? Might there be some times that I choose drudgery over joy? And if so, why?

Those ungrateful wedding guests seem to be early victims of a malaise that has grown worse and worse with the passage of time: the idea that time must be used productively, that we must always be doing something, producing something, achieving something. It is a well-known saying of Blaise Pascal that *"All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone"*, but it neatly expresses something very deep: we make ourselves very busy so as not to spend time in emptiness, in unproductive things like thinking, or praying, or rejoicing, or even looking at a sculpture or a picture, or listening to music (as opposed to using it as background while we do something else). Time that is unproductive feels all wrong, and can also be very uncomfortable because

allowing ourselves to be alone reminds us that we are, well, alone. If your child came home from school, or your spouse came home from work, and you asked them how they had spent the day and they answered 'thinking' you would probably immediately react 'Really – that's all?' Doing nothing when we could be working feels really odd. There is a piece of performance art by a Finnish artist called Pilvi Takala that challenges us. She gets a job as a trainee in the marketing department of a large company, and she sits at her desk or in the library and does nothing: all day. One day she spends the whole day in a lift, just going up and down. Asked what she is doing she says 'thought work'. Her colleagues are very unsettled, and emails and phone calls start to flow: this has got to stop. Browsing the internet or looking at facebook when you are supposed to be working are seen as quite normal activity, but the non-activity of thinking is threatening.

We can make ourselves so busy, so active, that we miss the chances to stop, to celebrate, to rejoice – to think – just to be happy with being who we are and where we are. None of us are immune – even in the Church there is a danger that we think we need projects and activities and schemes, some of which are very good but not if they distract us from the pure joy of being. In a way this is why Mass is so important: it is time carved out of the productive week in which to be unproductive, to rejoice in God's love and mercy and simply to 'be' in his presence.

Don't let's make ourselves so busy that we shut ourselves out of joy. When something strikes you and you think 'that's nice' don't rush on by, stop and revel in it. Let a chance meeting in the street become a long conversation; a beautiful view become something to gaze at; a tune on the radio something to listen to intently, stopping what you are doing for the duration. We are created to work, of course, to feed and shelter ourselves, but more than that we are created for joy. Don't let it pass you by. Now let's rejoice together at the love and mercy of God for he is on his way, he is at the door, he is coming to us now.