

Second Sunday after Pentecost, 23rd June 2019

Until 1955, the feast of Corpus Christi had an octave, the celebration of the feast being extended, as it were, over a period of eight days. Today, therefore, was known as the 'Sunday within the Octave of Corpus Christi'. And although it is now called the 'Second Sunday after Pentecost' and green vestments are worn instead of white, the liturgy remains exactly the same: the prayers, the Epistle and Gospel, everything in fact. This is important to know because it helps us to better understand the readings, the lessons, from today's Mass.

The Gospel opens with: "Jesus spoke to the Pharisees this parable: 'A certain man made a great supper, and invited many [...]' (Lk 14:16). Making a possible connection with Corpus Christi is indeed very easy: the "great supper" is quite simply the Eucharist. That is one way in which to interpret the "parable", and the one which is of course encouraged by this Sunday's association with the feast of Corpus Christi. Another help for us in trying to understand today's "parable" is to ascertain its context within the pages of St Luke's Gospel. Here is the verse which immediately precedes it: "When one of them that sat at table with him [with Jesus that is], had heard these things, he [the unnamed Pharisee] said to him: Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God" (Lk 14:15).

In response to what seems to be a pious platitude, the Lord explores the possible unwillingness of people like the Pharisees to actually accept the invitation to "eat bread in the kingdom of God", and answer the summons to come to the "great supper" - "And he sent his servant at the hour of supper to say to them that were invited, that they should come, for now all things are ready. And they began all at once to make excuse. The first said to him: I have bought a farm, and I must needs go out and see it: I pray thee, hold me excused. And another said: I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to try them: I pray thee, hold me excused" (Lk 14:17-19). These excuses are no doubt justifiable in the minds of those asking to be "excused", but they are fairly flimsy, as it has been pointed out: wouldn't anyone look at a farm or try out some oxen before going ahead and buying them?!

And then there is, which I have not forgotten, the third and final excuse (things do indeed tend to come in threes in the Gospels): "I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come" (Lk 14:20). This is somewhat different from the

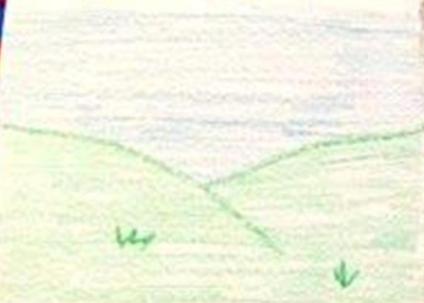
previous two, for a number of reasons: first of all (and please take this in good humour), "a wife" is not the same as property or livestock, nor is she strictly speaking "bought"; while the man's excuse is not that he, like the others, must go and find out what he has acquired (we assume that he has done that already!); and, lastly, his excuse is presented as being self-evident: "therefore I cannot come" (Lk 14:20) instead of "hold me excused" (Lk 14:18, 19).

The fact is that the man was trying to justify his excuse on the basis of the Law, the book of Deuteronomy, which stated that: "When a man hath lately taken a wife, he shall not go out to war, neither shall any public business be enjoined him, but he shall be free at home without fault, that for one year he may rejoice with his wife" (Dt 24:5). That is of course a particular, indeed a pharisaical (namely, typical of the Pharisees), way of arguing: when the Law says "he shall be free at home without fault", it therefore can be argued that he should be "at home" and "free" from being disturbed by invitations to go out for supper, even to "a great supper" (Lk 14:16).

"Come! All Things Are Ready!"

The Parable of the Great Supper Luke 14:15-24

Excuse #1



Bought land.
Must see it.

Excuse #2



Bought oxen.
Must test them.

Excuse #3



Married
a wife.

Quickly! Bring in the poor, wounded, crippled, lame.
There is more room. Go to the highways and hedges.
Urge them to come, so my house will be filled.

Would the Pharisee who "sat at table" with the Lord and "said to him: Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God" (Lk 14:15), have made similar excuses when the actual invitation to come was made? We do not know that of course, but we do nevertheless know that the excuses in the "parable" seem characteristic of the Pharisees as "lovers of money" and of material goods, mentioned elsewhere in St Luke's Gospel (16:14), as well as a twisting of the Law to suit their own purpose. The invitation itself seems to imply, taking the "parable" in its immediate context, the "great supper" (Lk 14:16) "in the kingdom of God" (Lk 14:15): the eschatological "supper" in heaven at the end of time, in other words. That is indeed the ultimate, the most important, invitation that anyone could possibly receive, and yet people still make their excuses.

The "great supper" (Lk 14:16) in what seems to be St Matthew's version of the same "parable" is described instead as "a marriage" for the son of a king: "The kingdom of heaven is likened to a king, who made a marriage for his son. And he sent his servants, to call them that were invited to the marriage; and they would not come" (Mt 22:2-3). If "the kingdom of heaven is likened to a king", it is not difficult then to see the "king" as the king of heaven, God, and "his son" as Christ. If we move now from St Matthew's Gospel, the first book of the New Testament, to the last book, the Apocalypse, we hear not so much a pious platitude as a genuine beatitude: "Blessed are they that are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rv 19:9).

This beatitude has been incorporated into the "*Ecce Agnus Dei*" in the newer rite of the Mass, only for some reason without the "marriage" bit: "*Ecce Agnus Dei* (Behold the Lamb of God), *ecce qui tollit peccata mundi* (behold him who takes away the sins of the world). *Beati qui ad cenam Agni vocati sunt* (Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb)". The Mass, the Eucharist, is indeed the foretaste of that "great supper" (Lk 14:16) of the Gospel "parable", the apocalyptic "supper of the Lamb" (Rv 19:9). Again excuses could be made for not acting upon the invitation, some serious though others simply flimsy. If we were to justify to ourselves that our own affairs were more important and worthy of interest than those of God, then we would as such be far from "the kingdom of God" (Lk 14:15) and that response of the centurion (which we ourselves humbly say in triplicate, beating our breast): "*Domine, non sum dignus, ut intres sub tectum meum: sed tantum dic verbo, et sanabitur anima mea*" (cf. Mt 8:8; Lk 7:6).