

28th Sunday of the Year, Year 'A.' MT 2011 Week 1, 9th

October.

Welcome, or welcome back. The gates of a new academic year stand open to receive you, and those two Impostors, Triumph and Disaster, each lie in waiting just across the threshold to have their wicked way with you. Do not be seduced by the one nor overwhelmed by the other. Very little which will happen during this term will really turn out to be as important as it first appears; very few people whom you meet will turn out to be quite as effortlessly clever, enviably successful or infuriatingly beautiful as you first thought. So sit back, sit light, and enjoy the ride.

Pusey House welcomes you, or welcomes you back. Here, much is familiar, as our patterns, routines and habits of life

begin again; but something, or someone, is different. Father Philip Corbett is here at the High Mass as a member of Chapter for the first time; a fresh expression of Priest Librarian, and our Chaplain. Welcome, Father.

So, for us in Oxford, today is Sunday of Week 1 of Michaelmas Term, the first full day of term for the University. But before it is Full Term, or First Week, or any other such man-made marking of time, today is the Lord's Day, the Day of Resurrection, the Day of God's new creation, the First Day of the Week. It is the day when those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ gather not simply to celebrate his rising from the dead on the first Easter Day (though we do that), nor even to celebrate and proclaim his continuing risen-ness, that He, Jesus, lives now and forever (though we

do that do), but to begin to live out our own resurrection life in the here and now, and to anticipate that day when we too shall share in the glory of the Kingdom where Jesus has gone before us, when we too shall be citizens of Heaven.

Now as you may have noticed, the readings appointed at Mass today have a common theme which is very appropriate to the beginning of a new term and year here at Pusey House. That theme is, food. Food is very important at Pusey House. In this, we are being entirely Scriptural. Listen again to the words of the prophet Isaiah:

On this mountain, the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of choice wines

The wine isn't bad here either. But what is Isaiah talking about? What is this feast of fat things and fine wines, which

seems to have so little in common with *nouvelle cuisine* or the Rosemary Conley hip-and-thigh diet? (That dates me.)

This sumptuous banquet on Mount Zion is nothing less than a vision of the felicity, the vision of blessedness, which God intends for all humanity. The prophet emphasises the magnificence of the feast. But it is a feast which is not only about eating and drinking, however much those things symbolise and stand for all the joy and abundance of the Kingdom of God. The feast is also about the elimination of suffering, pain and death and about the gift of gladness, God's response to the people's hope and trust in him.

In today's Gospel reading from St Matthew (but it happens in all the Gospels), Jesus picks up this theme of feasting, and he tells us just what he means us to understand by what he is

saying. *The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son; or, to put it more literally, the kingdom of heaven is like, or, is likened, to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son...* The Greek word in the Gospel which we translate as 'may be compared with' or more literally 'may be likened to' is one which was to go on and become one of the most important in the history of early Christian doctrine, for it is the word which gives us *homoousion*, or, from the Latin, *consubstantial*: the word which the Fathers of the Council of Nicea used to describe the likeness of the first two persons of the Godhead, the Father and the Son, one with another, who each share the divine nature, such that the Father is God and also the Son is God.

So when Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is **like** a king who gives a wedding feast, he is not simply saying, “there is some vague similarity between these two things,” but rather – this is it! When you sit down at table at the feast, you touch, taste, share in the Kingdom of Heaven – just as those later Nicene fathers were to insist that both the Father and the Son touch, taste, share in what it is to be divine, what it is to be God. So with us: when we feast, our feasting bears the imprint of the Kingdom of God.

On the night of his betrayal, on the night before he dies, Jesus once again takes this master-image of the Kingdom of Heaven being like a feast, a place of fat things and choice wines, and he gives it an a twist. St Luke this time draws it out best. Sitting with his disciples, and having predicted his

own suffering and death, Jesus takes a cup of wine, and offers it to them, saying: *Take this, and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.* Jesus thus help his disciples to understand that the wine of this cup somehow anticipates the wine of the Kingdom; that though it is the cup of suffering, it is also the cup of joy and gladness, the cup which speaks of that feasting and gladness which will be forever ours in the blessedness of heaven.

So it is that from the earliest times, Christians have thought of the Holy Eucharist, the mass, this perfect act of worship in which we are presently engaged, as not only the living memorial of the Cross and Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ, but the pledge and promise of future glory, the

moment in time when eternity breaks in. Dr Pusey, preaching before the University in 1853, urged his congregation to receive the sacred species, the bread of life and the cup of salvation, as a foretaste of the life of heaven, telling them:

Then shall all truth be open to you, all love shall fill you; soul and body shall be satisfied with the likeness [of Christ]; they shall rest in His love; they shall have all they long for, and long for all they have. All you long for, shall be for ever yours; for the All-holy Trinity shall be for ever yours...(The Lord will fill you) with His Grace, fill you with Himself, the Author of Grace.

For Pusey, **every** gift and grace is found in the Eucharist.

Here perhaps is one way to understand the thrust of the rest

of the parable of the wedding feast which Jesus tells. At first blush, the sting in the tail of the parable is hard to hear as good news: who is the man without the wedding garment? Why has he come improperly or inadequately dressed for the feast? Did he realise that he had done wrong? Is the harshness of his punishment really justified – as if we might lock a man up and throw away the key for wearing brown shoes in London, or a black bow tie with an evening coat; or perhaps we should think of one of those stewards at the Henley Regatta measuring ladies' hemlines and turning away all those showing a hint of bare flesh above the knee. Some patristic writers found in the hapless victim a type of Christ Himself, the one who is rejected, bound, crucified. But more commonly, the man without the wedding garment is seen as simply being a kind of everyman, any one of us, who is not

open to receive the gifts of the Kingdom, whose heart is hardened against the grace, mercy and peace which Christ brings, who does not share Dr Pusey's conviction that all life, all truth, all love is here. In their reflections upon the story, some among the Fathers saw the wedding feast as standing for the whole life of the Church, which has, in her Scriptures, in her Sacraments, in her life of holiness and catholicity, all that is needful to tread the path which leads to Heaven. Not to understand this is not so much to be thrown into the outer darkness, but to put yourself there: to choose consciously to live outside the household of faith, outside the body of those united with Christ in baptism and fed by Him and with Him in the Eucharist. In his letter to the Philippians, of all St Paul's writings the one which is most filled with joy – yet written from captivity – Paul speaks of

the secret of facing 'plenty and hunger, abundance and want.' The plenty, the abundance, is here, in the grace-filled sacramental life, in the water of baptism, the oil of anointing, the bread and wine of the altar which are the Lord's body and blood. Here at Pusey House we will not pretend that the church is perfect; and we mourn for her divisions, and for the woundedness of so much of her life. But we will nevertheless go on inviting you and all who come here into the mysteries of the Kingdom which the church treasures and hands on from generation to generation; indeed, the mysteries of the Kingdom which make the church, which constitute and reveal her life, and which unite us with Jesus Christ, her Head and Our Lord.

Welcome to the feast, welcome to the heavenly banquet.

*Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of
the Lamb.*