

JESUS said, The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son; and sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding; and they would not come.

Matt 22.1

The kingdom of heaven is like a king who makes a marriage for his son. We have some experience of royal weddings in this country, and an invitation to the wedding and to the feast is a prize of great worth. Even those who may not be great royal watchers or even royal supporters may be very glad to get such a special invitation. So why do the guests decide not to come?

This is no ordinary wedding. It is an invitation to our better selves, an invitation to the people we are becoming as well as the people we are already. The joy of the wedding is more rich and refined, it is not just being 'drunk with wine', but rather a kind of spiritual inebriation. We may chuckle, but St Paul wants us to know that for our better selves this is not just a play on words, it is really joy, more joy, joy described in the epistle, a joy which overflows 'in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs' in 'singing and making melody in our hearts to the Lord; giving thanks always for all things unto God'¹

We are invited to the wedding invited to participate not only as guests, but we are invited to become part of the wedding and part of the feast

A picture is worth 1000 words, so Sandro Botticelli and his 'Mystic Nativity' painted in the "half-time after the time" of Revelation 12:14 , or in year 1500.² May help to make this sermon more brief.



¹ Imagine knowing more of this joy, that we might be able to 'give thanks always for all things'. What it would be like to so know the goodness, and wisdom and love of God that we could 'give thanks always for all things', to be able with Job to bind ourselves, with a struggle of course, to God's sweet providence, and even to the form of the cross where Christ comes down to share our struggles and sorrows so that even in the lowest place his love is our food and our drink? Perhaps we see something about why the guests did not come.

² National Gallery in London, This painting pictures for us the marriage of heaven and earth, of the divine and human, it is the marriage which the King made for his son.

Gregory the Great describes both the painting and the Gospel for today:

‘God the Father made a marriage feast for God the Son when he united him to a human nature in the Virgin's womb, when he desired him who was God before the ages to become a human being at the end of the ages.’³

In the centre of the painting is the infant Christ, the baby in whom God unites human nature to himself, and His Mother, her Maker's maker. The marriage to which the King invites the wedding guests is nothing less than the mystic marriage of the divine and human in Christ.⁴

But this is more than a marriage, it is a marriage feast. We don't just celebrate the union of the divine and human, we are taken into it. If we look again, we can see the sheets on which the baby lies, the swaddling clothes, also have the character of grave clothes. The stable which shelters the holy family has a straw roof and at least part of a stone wall on the left just below the hatch. This hint of a wall emphasizes that this stable is also a cave, a cave which is also a stone tomb. The painting already points to the cross where the child will offer himself.

The mystic marriage is seen by human eyes when Christ is born, but it is consummated on the Cross.

Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars: the Wisdom of God, the Lord Jesus builds a spiritual temple, a Church, with the seven pillars of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit when his side was opened on the cross.

Divine Wisdom has killed her beasts; Divine Wisdom hath mingled her wine; hath also furnished her table.-

So Gregory the Great gives a second description, a better one, in the same sermon from which I already quoted:

‘A clearer and safer thing to say is that the Father made a marriage feast for his Son by joining the Church to him through the mystery of his incarnation. The womb of the Virgin who bore him was the bridal chamber of this bride-groom, ...⁵ He truly came forth like a bridegroom from his bridal chamber who, as God incarnate, left the inviolate womb of the Virgin to unite the Church to himself.

Now we can see the painting with new eyes, we don't just look at the painting, we are part of it, we are in the painting in more than one way.

At top, the golden dome of the eternal heavens has opened, and angels come down to dance in joy and to invite us into the same circle. And we have already joined them, we began worship this morning with their words ‘Glory be to God on high, and in earth peace’. Every mass unfolds within the universe proclaimed by the Angels. In Botticelli's painting, peace is pictured by the embrace of angels and men and women along the bottom of the painting.⁶

³ Homily 38 , 40 Gospel Homilies , p 341

⁴ Chalcedon, 451, ‘truly God and truly man [...] recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation’.

⁵ and so the psalmist says: *He has set his tent in the sun, and he is like a bridegroom coming forth from his bridal chamber.*

⁶ The colours in the painting are not just by accident – the Angels are wearing the white of a pure faith, the green of a hope which is the soil or growth and fruitfulness, and the red of a burning charity toward God and humanity. The embrace in an embrace of faith, hope and love uniting heaven and earth.

We are in that embrace, we are invited to share in that peace which the world cannot give but which is ours in Christ.⁷

So why would anyone stay away from the feast? Why might our hearts grow cold and we, you or I, brothers and sisters, stop taking any interest in the wedding supper to which we are invited?

St Joseph helps us to understand one of the reasons we might stay away. We see him to the left of the Christ Child. Why is he sleeping? This is a traditional way of picturing Joseph in icons and paintings. He's not just tired, the man who is more tired than his wife who has given birth. Joseph here is a kind of picture of human nature not able to grasp what is unfolding before him. Joseph is a picture of human nature not able to see the great things which God is doing, things which surpass our natural capacity to see. We need to be woken up not just in a normal way, but make away by the indwelling spirit.

But there is a second problem. At the bottom of the painting, we see the demons fleeing – perhaps the easiest one to see at the bottom left disappearing through a crack at the base of the tree. Along that crack between the stone and the path two more demons are disappearing. Christ drives away the demons, but the demons also picture temptation. In all kinds of ways, we may reject the King's son. There are those who don't just decline the invitation to the marriage, but who attack the king's servants. This is a picture of what sin looks like, this is what sin in our lives looks like, and it's not a pretty picture.⁸ If we are not attracted by the invitation, it's a good sign that these demons are more active in our lives than we realize.

Our belonging in this picture means more than that we are there with the angels and saints. We are also in the marriage, we are within in embrace which unites the human and divine in Christ, we are part of the marriage. We proclaim this whenever we respond to priest's prayer that God may accept this my sacrifice of and yours.

Christ at the centre of the painted offered himself once for all on the cross. Whenever we celebrate the holy communion, what we do here in chapel and on the altar participates in the one sacrifice once offered. In the words of St Augustine:

'We are offered in the offering of Christ to God' or, also in the words of St Augustine, 'we are' what we receive, we become what we feed on.' All our offerings of ourself, our selves, souls, body substance, are taken into this one offering of Christ.⁹

⁷ In Christ, in the words of Psalm 85, mercy and truth have met together, they have embraced, righteousness and peace have kissed each other.

⁸ The demons correspond to the figure of King Herod who lurks behind the mystical nativity, who challenges all invitations to the wedding. There is something of Herod, the king who does not wish to acknowledge another king, another authority, in each of us. The struggle we have in seeing the beauty which Botticelli paints, the struggle which often masks itself behind a supposed conflict between faith and reason, may in fact be that struggle with King Herod in ourselves – do we really want another king, or do we want to be our own rulers?

⁹ Augustine, Sermon 227, to the newly baptized at Easter: "That bread which you can see on the altar, sanctified by the word of God, is the body of Christ. That chalice, or rather, what the chalice contains, sanctified by the word of God, is the blood of Christ. It was by means of these things that the Lord Christ wished to present us with his body and blood, which he shed for our sake for the forgiveness of sins. If you receive them well, you are yourselves what you receive. You see, the apostle says, We, being many, are one loaf, one body."

Augustine, Sermon 272: "If, therefore, you are the body of Christ and his members, your mystery has been placed on the Lord's table, you receive your mystery. You reply 'Amen' to that which you are, and by replying you consent."

Augustine, City of God, Book X, Chapter 6: "And hence, the whole redeemed city, that is to say, the congregation or community of the saints, is offered to God as a universal sacrifice through the great High Priest, who offered Himself to God in His passion for us, that we might be members of this glorious head, according to the form of a servant. For it was this form He offered, in this He was offered, because it is according to it He is Mediator, in this He is our Priest, in this the Sacrifice. Accordingly, when the apostle had exhorted us to present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, our reasonable service, and not to be conformed to the world, but to be transformed in the renewing of our mind, that we might prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God, that is to say, the true sacrifice of ourselves, he says, For I say, through the grace of God which is given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to

The invitation we hear today is embraced by All Saints and All Souls. Yesterday, and on Friday evening, we celebrated the way in which the saints already share in the Son's perfect worship of the Father. ¹⁰The joyful celebration of All saints, and the battle with the demons and with all that diminishes or attacks human nature lies behind our prayers for all the Souls. Both are here in this painting.

We are already in this painting, and we are already at the marriage feast. Let us pray to be away, let us turn away from all that attacks the great gifts which we have in Christ, and let us come to this feast not just for ourselves for all people.

think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, according as God has dealt to every man the measure of faith. For, as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another, having gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us. This is the sacrifice of Christians: we, being many, are one body in Christ. And this also is the sacrifice which the Church continually celebrates in the sacrament of the altar, known to the faithful, in which she teaches that she herself is offered in the offering she makes to God."This is the more profoundly significance of any kind of offering of ourselves, any gift of ourselves, our souls, our bodies, our substance – we are not just invited to the feast. God has chosen that we are part of this feast, that our offering of ourselves is part of the Son's gift of himself.

¹⁰ Tomorrow, we will pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ who are at rest. In doing that, we are embracing for them the bright sorrow which our Lord embraced for them. His perfect repentance on our behalf, is how our departed brothers and sisters and how we participate in the joy which the Son has with the Father with the angels and all the Saints.