

The Peace of God which Passes All Understanding

In the name of him in whom we rejoice always, dear friends in Christ: Feasting, celebrating, rejoicing – these are the themes that come through loud and clear in all three of today's Scripture lessons. From Isaiah we have the great day of the resurrection described for us as a massive feast that the Lord has prepared for the faithful on his holy mountain. It's what is elsewhere called the marriage feast of the Lamb in his kingdom which has no end. Why does it have no end? It's because death is destroyed, swallowed up forever by the Lord himself. So too the curse on the earth is lifted. From here on out the land produces food in abundance. There's never any want or need. No one ever goes hungry. Instead we have this beautiful image of ongoing celebration: the best of meats, the finest wines, and the faithful lifting their voices in praise to the Lord for his goodness and exclaiming, "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us ... Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation!"

Today's Gospel reading gives us another window on this feast. This time it's explicitly called a wedding feast that a king has prepared for his son. That means it's going to be an especially elaborate and happy affair. I mean, people are joyful at weddings anyway, but in the ancient world the marriage of the crown prince meant looking ahead to the next generation. We've got a king. We've got his son to rule after him. And with the prince getting married it's a safe bet that before long he'll have a son too. What it means is the guarantee of a smooth transition of power for many years to come and therefore the promise of continued peace and prosperity in the kingdom. Now, that's something to celebrate! And it would truly be an honor and blessing to be invited to such a wedding feast.

What the parable of Jesus adds to the picture, however, is the boorish ingratitude of those who were originally invited and then declined to come. These by their actions show their contempt for the king and his son – and really, for the kingdom itself. Others are so rebellious that they humiliate and murder the poor servants whose only job it was to tell them that the feast is ready. As we heard, the king deals with them decisively. No more wedding invitations for them. But the lavish feast is ready and someone has to eat it, so the king sends his servants to any and all who will come. And soon the banquet hall is filled happy guests. Well, except for that foolish guy who thought he could enter the great feast of salvation without being clothed in the righteousness of Christ. That is to say, he thought he had earned a place in salvation based on his own record of goodness and merit. Not so fast, Buddy. Out you go. This party is for redeemed sinners, not for those who don't think they need redeeming. But the thing to see is that in both readings, the feast of celebration for the saved continues on unabated.

Then, bracketed by these two views of the great feast of salvation, we've got Paul with a very upbeat message urging us to rejoice in the Lord *at all times*. You see, in Paul's thinking, for the faithful the feast of salvation has already begun. We don't have to wait for the grand and glorious day of Christ's return. The party is happening now. The joy of it is now – at least in part.

And that *sounds* really good. We'd like to get into that spirit. But then we look around and see what's going on in the world at present, and we hesitate. Out west whole states are on fire, the worst fire season in recorded history. Tens of thousands are displaced, their homes destroyed; many have lost their lives. Down south we've got a record number of hurricanes causing wind damage and massive flooding. I actually saw a photograph of utility workers removing shark carcasses that were entangled in the top of power poles. How does that even happen? Earlier this year we had that violent derecho wind that cut a wide path of destruction

across the center of our state causing monumental loss. It seems that here and abroad in the year 2020, nature itself is bent on our destruction.

And that's only a small part of it. Let's add the global pandemic into the mix with all of its attendant problems: First and most obviously death; what? Something upwards of 200,000 victims in this country alone and still rising. Then there's the economic devastation it's caused: millions out of work, countless businesses closed – many permanently; people who can't pay their rent or for their health insurance or even for basic groceries. And on top of it all is the fear: the fear of catching the bug or of accidentally spreading it to others or of compromised older family members being exposed ...

Playing up these fears and others, we're in the middle of an election cycle, each side grimly forecasting that if the other side wins it will mean unmitigated disaster for the nation. "Our opponents will sink the country into an irreversible downward spiral that will end democracy, result in massive death, and collapse into total economic ruin." Yes, it's led many to think that we're teetering on the edge of an apocalypse – or some fantastic modern concept of what an apocalypse might entail. Now, to the best of my knowledge no flesh eating zombies have been spotted prowling neighborhoods; but then, it is 2020, and the year's not over, is it?

Zombies quite aside, my point is that overall we are experiencing a rising sense of insecurity. Bad things are happening straight across the board, and they seem to be getting a lot worse. And the institutions and structures we depended upon to provide stability are proving themselves unreliable, which only increases the worry and anxiety we feel.

So, yes, Paul telling us to put on a big happy smile and rejoice in the midst of all this might seem to be out of reach. But not when we actually listen to what he's saying. He's not telling us to rejoice in just some general happy sense: let's pretend all is well and life is good. No, he's telling us to rejoice in the Lord – the Lord who created us, who in love redeemed us with the blood of Jesus his Son; the Lord who is guarding us by faith and the power of his Spirit, and who is directing all things for our good and for our ultimate salvation; the Lord who is attentive to the prayers of his people and who is willing and able to grant more than we could ask or desire.

Worry, fear, anxiety: these are born from the feeling that we're losing control of things. The truth is that we were never in control in the first place. In our sinful pride we only imagine that we are, but it's only an illusion. Our loving Savior is in control of all things. He's got us in his hands. And whatever he does, he does for our good. Thus we are to find our sense of peace and security in him. This what Paul means when he speaks of the peace of God which passes all understanding. It's like the peace a young child knows when its cradled safely in mother's arms and the father's protective presence is watching over both. I'm safe. I'm secure. I'm cared for. There's nothing can harm me.

This is not just wishful thinking. It's important to remember that when Paul writes these words, he is in prison in Rome. Actually, it's his second imprisonment. The first time around he was under house arrest while he waited for trial, the charges being that he caused a riot in Jerusalem. He was acquitted in that case. But at that time, Christianity was not illegal in the empire. Now, several years later, it is. And this time around Paul finds himself in the imperial dungeon. His circumstances are decidedly more uncomfortable. But he still knows the peace of God. It's in the valley of death's shadow he fears no evil. It's in the presence of his enemies that the Lord sets the table for him. Paul knows that if he's condemned, he'll be put to death. And then he gets to go be with Christ in glory. He looks forward to that. If, on the other hand he's set free, he gets to go on working to bring others to salvation. That's good too. He knows

that whatever the Lord in his wisdom decides, it will be for the best. So he's at perfect peace, happy with whatever the Lord chooses.

Paul wants us, his readers, to rest comfortably in the same peace of God which passes understanding. And so doing he directs us to a more positive outlook. Rather than look at all the problems and disappointments this world has to offer, and there are plenty of them, he says, "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if they is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." Like the evening news, our attention tends to focus on the negative. But good things are happening too if only we would allow ourselves to see them.

Let me give just one simple example. It goes back to that violent storm that ravaged a big chunk of our state that I mentioned earlier. The city of Cedar Rapids where my daughter lives was especially hard hit. She told me that though she lived in her little neighborhood for years, she didn't really know any of the neighbors. None of them knew each other. Families move in and families move out and everyone pretty much kept to themselves. The storm changed that. It forced them to work together for weeks clearing the debris. They were sharing meals, and checking on each other, and if someone needed something all they had to do was ask. Somebody had it or could get it. The shared hardship pulled them together. Yes, the stately trees that once provided shade in her neighborhood are gone. But now it's a real *neighborhood*. And I'm sure it's not the only one.

So also with this pandemic: yes, it's dangerous, potentially deadly to some. And yet we are working together to get through it. And we are seeing acts of charity and kindness and concern for people in need. It isn't all bad news. It's opened opportunities to serve. And people are rising to the occasion.

Of course, if we really want to focus on the positive, on those things that are true and honorable and just and pure and lovely and commendable, and so on, we need to direct our attention to the Lord himself: to his Word and promises, to his holy Sacraments, because this is where he manifests his saving presence with us in this world so full of trouble. This is where the God of peace is with us granting us the peace that passes all understanding, and guarding our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus so that we don't have to suffer any anxiety or fear, not now or ever. Therefore may God in his mercy always grant us this peace. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!