

**23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time- Cycle B (Roman Rite)**  
**14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Byzantine Rite)**

## **Breaking boundaries towards the Kingdom Banquet**

I would like to begin with a question that I have often asked before: Why are we here? Why have we gathered together as assembly? What have we come to do this morning? And why? Now, before you answer, let me say that the obvious and most basic answer to these questions is, of course, that we have come to celebrate the Eucharist, to perform the Divine Liturgy, to offer the Sacrifice of the Mass- however you may want to phrase it. But in performing this liturgical action, what are we really doing?- that's the question. The readings at both the Roman Mass and Byzantine Divine Liturgy push us to ask that question and to try to answer it.

This is the way that I would try to answer the question: We are a people, a gathering, an assembly, who are here today because we have become convinced that ever since the events of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, God has visited the human race in a unique and singular fashion, and that the "Age or the Kingdom which is to Come" has in some sense already visited us, and that we are being drawn and pulled towards it. We have come here today because we believe that what we are doing and will do together in this assembly is a manifestation, a disclosure, of that Age and Kingdom which is not yet here, but which is pulling into the future. We have gathered, or maybe more accurately, we have allowed ourselves to be gathered, so that we can look towards God's future and so allow our lives to be shaped by that future.

We have walked into this building either as individuals or as small units- families- of one kind or another. But, if we are attentive to what's going on, to what we are doing, something really important is going to be happening to us. We are not just being made into more pious or more holy individuals- the Eucharist is not just about me and my devotional life. Something much bigger is happening here. We are being *made into* an assembly, an assembly which shows here and now the future Kingdom, what the end of things is going to be like, and what this world and human life are meant to be. To put this in a nutshell, Jesus the Christ came to announce that the Kingdom is at hand, to proclaim freedom to those in bondage, and to gather together those who have been scattered and alienated from one another and from God. In other words, He came to put together what has been broken apart by the work of the evil one, *diabolos*, the "divider", the "destroyer". And this is the very task that He, as our Lord and Master, has given to us, to this Eucharistic assembly, as His Body, to continue to do.

The Gospel readings at both liturgies today are very powerful expressions of this task. In the Roman Mass, Mark's gospel tells us that Jesus is the One who makes the deaf hear and the mute speak. He unbinds what has been bound in

the lives of people living in a broken world. His word of command- *Ephphatha*- "*BE OPENED*" - spoken to a deaf mute- and these are the very words that we repeat at every Baptism of a child or an adult- "*BE OPENED*"- is a kind of shorthand for what the good news is and what the work of Jesus was and what the work of the Church, when she is true to her vocation, still is. Jesus did this as a fulfillment of those words from the prophet Isaiah [that we heard earlier]: "Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, He comes with vindication; With divine recompense He comes to save you. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared." When Jesus unbound ears and tongues He was, in what He *did*, showing that the Age to Come, the future Kingdom, was dawning.

The gospel reading at the Divine Liturgy is the parable from Matthew about the Marriage Supper- again, a potent image of the Age and Kingdom which is to come. What strikes me about this parable is how all-encompassing and inclusive the invitation to the Banquet actually is. According to Matthew's version, the servants of the King are sent into the streets and they "gathered all whom they found, *both bad and good*, so the wedding hall was filled with guests", and the only one to be thrown out was the one who refused to wear a wedding garment, that is, the one who seems to have refused to acknowledge that it was a wedding celebration that he had been invited to. And I think that it's important to see that it is the King, not the King's servants, who make the determination that the guy is to be tossed out, and the King does it only after the man has actually already entered the wedding banquet and has made quite clear, by not putting on the wedding garment, that he really doesn't want to join in the celebration.

These images of the Kingdom and of the Age to come say something quite directly to what it is for us to be church this morning because what our Catholic theology quite rightly tells us is that the Kingdom of God is made manifest precisely around the Eucharistic Table. In other words, if our Eucharistic celebration is to be an icon of the Age to come and to disclose what the future Kingdom is like, then one of our main tasks as a people and as a community responding to the truth of the Eucharist is to unbind what is bound in the lives of people, to open the ears and tongues and eyes of those we meet in as many ways as possible. Our job is not to lay heavier and heavier burdens on others, like the pharisees did, but to liberate, to set free, and to restore life. Like St. Paul said, "For freedom Christ has set us free". And while it is absolutely true that freedom brings with it responsibility and accountability, it is the responsibility and accountability not of slaves, but of free sons and daughters of the Most High. The challenge of freedom runs all through the church's history and needs to be taken up constantly by every generation and in every Christian life. This Eucharistic assembly today, this morning, is an assembly of free men and women and children who know who they are in Jesus Christ.

If we take seriously Matthew's rendition of Jesus' parable of the marriage feast and the task of the servants to go out and to bring in everyone we can find, both

bad and good, another dimension of the future Kingdom is disclosed for us. The Eucharist as a foretaste of the coming Kingdom is a sign and sacrament of that final Eucharist, that final marriage banquet which calls all the nations, all peoples, the good and the bad alike. If we think of the Eucharist as being an invitation only to a closed group of “members in good standing” or if we regard it as being a reward for those who are righteous, for those who have made all the right decisions, for those who have all the “i”s dotted and “t”s crossed in their lives, then we have missed the whole point about what the Eucharist is- the Meal, the Banquet, whose Host and Priest is the One who practiced table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners and who calls us, His servants, to go out into the hedges and byways and to bring in both the good and the bad. If we are to take this utterly seriously as a Church, we may in the future have to do a little revamping of Canon Law in certain respects.

Today's epistle reading from James [at the Roman Mass] about how at the liturgical assembly we need to be careful not to show favoritism towards the rich at the expense of the poor is a very serious warning about how easily we can create divisions and separations at the Lord's Table which contradict what the Eucharist is. We do this as a Church in a multiplicity of ways, often times without realizing it, but for which we truly need to repent. I know a place in this city- a Catholic place-, for example, where Christians, Catholics, are no longer permitted into the church and no longer permitted to participate in the Eucharistic celebrations unless they are part of that particular institution where the Eucharist is being celebrated. This is an absolute contradiction of everything that the Eucharist is, the great gathering, catholicizing act which brings the People of God together and orientates us towards the final and ultimate gathering at the marriage supper of the Lamb. Perhaps as Catholics we need to relearn what that ancient Christian writing from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, the *Didache*, said so very well: “As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains, but was brought together and became one, so let your Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your Kingdom, for yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever!”