

In the novelette *Babette's Feast* by Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen) two Puritan sisters agree to their housemaid, Babette, cooking a dinner for their small religious community to celebrate what would have been their father's, and founder's, 100th birthday. Unknown to them Babette, a Parisian refugee who has lived with them for 12 years, was a celebrated chef, and as the preparations for the meal intensify the feast of the title slowly becomes a looming worry, we are told that the poor sisters, "now saw the French dinner coming upon them, a thing of incalculable nature and range." Of course, the dinner is incalculable to them, used as they are to just a broth and coffee: turtle soup, rich foods, washed down with champagne and vintage wine unrecognised by all but one of the diners. An abundance and an extravagance that is meant to bless but brings out other emotions. Feasting, banqueting, is at the heart of our readings this morning.

Isaiah's prophecy is mind blowing for the Israelites. It is tinged at the beginning with this desire for revenge rather than justice, enemy cities raised to the ground. But even amongst that the prophet builds "an architecture of hope."¹ Isaiah reminds Judah that they are waiting for the Lord their God, their

¹ Carolyn J Sharp, *Feasting on the Word, Year A Vol.4*, p.147

creator, the one who will **“make”** the feast, a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well matured wines strained clear.” But it doesn’t stop there, the one who makes the feast is the one who will destroy the shroud and the sheet of death forever, who will wipe away every tear and disgrace of the people. A feast, indeed, of incalculable nature and range.

God always feeds God’s people. From creation to manna and quail in the desert; from ravens bringing bread and water to prophets, to water gushing from a rock; from the bounty of the land to the bounty of God’s goodness. The history of God’s people is the history of God’s banqueting.

That is the background that the hearers of Jesus’ parable would have understood when they heard the word banquet. We need to understand that as we read the mounting anger in Matthew’s presentation of Jesus’ parables. This is the third parable Jesus tells in the Temple pointedly at the chief priests and elders. Each parable ratchets up the level of jeopardy of rejecting the kingdom that Jesus is offering and each parable ratchets up the hyperbole. In the wake of the destruction of the Temple in 70AD the Jewish people were left wondering what it meant for them now and why it had happened. This

parable is partly Matthew's answer, an outline of salvation history from a Christian perspective.² The same parable is found in Luke but presented without the final section with the wrongly dressed guest and without the sense of anger.

With that in mind let's reconsider the parable. The king throws a wedding banquet for his son and sends a 'save the date' to the usual people. They laugh it off or make various excuses. Then when the banquet is ready, the food is on the table, he sends urgent messengers who are mistreated or even killed. So enraged is the king that he sends his armies to destroy the cities of those invited. Then he invites anyone and everyone in the street good and bad, who come and fill the hall and feast. All is good until the king meets a guest not dressed in wedding clothes. When the king asks why not he gives no answer, and so is thrown out into the darkness with more weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Think back to Isaiah's banquet, think back to what God has offered Israel, what God has already in store in the kingdom that Jesus is offering. For Matthew the

² Daniel J Harrington SJ, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p.308

rejection of the scribes and the Pharisees, the ruling elite, leads to the inevitable destruction of the Temple, symbolic of the destruction of the faithless people of God. That much is obvious and that much we can sit with, maybe a bit uneasily, but generally we're ok because it doesn't affect us. But there is another layer for Matthew, the hearers of the gospel would have heard resonances of the feeding of the five thousand, of the feasts that Jesus and his disciples frequented, and ultimately of the Eucharist itself, the great banquet that points to the eternal wedding banquet of the Lamb. They, and thus us, are now put in the position of the invitee, of the Pharisee and scribe.

Then we get this strange ending. The hall is full, people have literally walked off the streets to come, unless by some miracle they were all wearing wedding clothes the king's treatment of the one guest is pretty harsh. There is a clue in Matthew's parable, the guest has no answer to the king's question, there's a sense that if the guest had answered anything, had the guest engaged, it might have ended differently. The parable is clearly symbolic, Matthew wants us to see God as the king, Jesus as the Son, the chief priests and elders as the guests who refuse, and Matthew's community as the good and the bad. What is lost to us is the symbolic meaning of the wedding clothes, commentators are

agreed that the original hearers would have understood, alas we are far from that.

Or are we? Matthew is not only talking about invitation, but he is also talking about participation. It is not enough to just show up to the banquet and not be changed. That's where I'd like to suggest that Philippians comes in. Paul is in prison but writing a personal and joyful letter to Philippi. Just as Isaiah was writing an architecture of hope so too is Paul, an energy of hope³ and joy.

Isaiah proclaimed that there is no exclusion to the banquet, the parable tells us that good and bad are invited, that's why Paul wants Eudora and Syntyche to reconcile, even those who quarrel, jostle and struggle with each other are invited to the banquet that will hopefully bring reconciliation. For the banquet is held in the middle of our troubled existence. The psalmist reminds us that the table is prepared in the midst of our enemies. We are not invited away from the world to eat in an untroubled place; we are seated in the midst of the troubles, "the road to heaven does not run from the world but through it."⁴ And so the call to pray and to rejoice, in defiance of all that would silence us.

³ Jay Emerson Johnson, *Feasting on the Word, Year A vol. 4*, p.146

⁴ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb*, p.

“Christian joy is subversive; it overturns threatening situations and frustrates those with selfish plans. Tyrants in every age have feared it, because they do not understand its origin. Joy is not an escape from the pain of life; it is a reconsideration and reinvestment in life from a different, liberating perspective.”⁵

So, Paul offers us the wedding clothes to change into. Prayer and rejoicing, whatever is true and honourable, whatever is just and pure, whatever is pleasing and commendable, anything worthy of praise or excellence, these are the wedding clothes.

For we cannot accept the invitation and not participate. We cannot talk of Jesus in the same context of authorising live streamed execution by firing squad; we cannot claim to have the right to continue inflict genocide in the name of God or God’s people; we cannot accept the invitation and close the doors to others because of their sexuality, gender, class, race, or ability; we cannot sit at the banquet and not notice who is not there; we cannot feast on God’s extravagant abundance and refuse to change.

⁵ Nathan Eddy, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, vol.4* p.161

There is a flip side to this too. We can find so many excuses as to why it's not really us who are invited to the banquet. It's the people who are holier than us, who pray more, who are more spiritual. The people who are kinder, more patient, more giving. It's not for me with all my doubt, anxiety and impatience. But God who is Love, bids us to come in, to sit and feast, as George Herbert exquisitely portrays in *Love III*. And in the very act of doing so, in accepting the invitation, in sitting, in feasting so we are changed. Paul reminds us in Philippians that that change is a constant, we constantly have to think about what is true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent and worthy of praise. We have to keep on doing the things we have learned, received, heard and seen. We have to keep on praying, rejoicing and asking. And we do that by coming again and again to the banquet. To the feast that God provides us in the sacrament.

So, come, the invitation is there; come, participate in the feast; come be changed and reclothed by bread and wine. And then we will be the people who Isaiah foresaw, who say, "This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."