
14th Sunday after Pentecost 2020
2 Corinthians 1:21-2:4 & Matthew 22:1-14

The longer God keeps me alive on this earth, the more I realize that living is hard work. Whether it's carpentry, writing poetry, teaching, or preaching, it boils down to hard work sooner or later. But leaving it there does not give you the big picture. Yes, work is a part of life, but it is not the whole of life. There is also recreation. Tears are a part of life, but so is laughter. Drudgery is a part of life, but there are also celebrations. The noise of city traffic is a part of life, but so is your favourite music.

Everybody wants to be happy, but how many people do you know who are genuinely content? Today, many are more concerned with their own and immediate family's needs, wants, and desires. Yet, everything in the scriptures suggests that the only way to real happiness is to put God and other people ahead of ourselves.

C.S. Lewis writes, "Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased." (C.S. Lewis.)

The Bible speaks of Jesus as "the man of sorrows." That is an appropriate title for Him. Jesus knew what it was like to be poor, lonely, hated, persecuted, and forsaken. He knew what it was to die on a cross. But true as this is, it is only a partial view of Jesus.

We might also consider Jesus as a man of joy. He loved and rejoiced in the world of nature. He found more beauty in wildflowers than in the splendid garments of kings. He had a heart for little children, and they for Him. Jesus' disposition tells us He smiled quickly and often. Children avoid people who are grouchy and never smile. Nor do such people pay much attention to children. Grumpy people are mostly absorbed in themselves.

So, today's Gospel presents Jesus with a festive spirit. He told a story about the kingdom of God. To Jesus being a part of God's kingdom means living under divine authority and living God's way. He compared following God to a royal wedding feast, as something to be celebrated and enjoyed.

Yet Jesus knew not everyone would regard the life of faith as a heaven-sent blessing, and some would refuse His invitation to God's banquet of life. Still, the feast is open to all who accept the invitation and a part in God's Kingdom.

But His generations tended not to see religious life in this way. They saw it as a duty to be carried out. An obligation is how people view religion today. Jesus looked at it in a different light. He not only lived according to the will of God but considered it a privilege. It was like being invited to a joyful and royal banquet. Maybe the secret of joy is to live for something besides oneself.

Not that religious faith can ever be all fun and games! It was not for Jesus, and never will be for those who follow him. The parable he told about the wedding feast is not all joy and celebration. It has a dark side, with touches of pain and even violence, yet true to life. The faith that Jesus had sometimes makes life more difficult and painful. He cared so much for people that their problems became His problems. Still, life to Jesus was a reason for joy.

How can we explain this dichotomy and share it? First, Jesus' joyful attitude came from his commitment to God. In today's parable, he portrays God as a king. But if this were all we knew about Him, God's picture would be grim for His invitation was more like a command. God became angry when people did not show up for the party, so He sent out marauding armies to destroy cities. But this was not how Jesus usually spoke about God. Most of the time, He spoke of God as Father. The name "father" could be just as terrifying to some people as "king." Imagine a child whose only image of a father is the angry man who comes home at night drunk and abuses everyone in the family. Jesus spoke of a heavenly Father who was patient and kind, loving, forgiving, and a source of joy.

Other people were a source of joy to Jesus. He knew the dark side of human nature better than anyone. The dark side of human nature scorned him, spit in his face, crowned him with thorns, and nailed him to a cross. Yet He never lost faith in people. In the parable about the king who gave a marriage feast for his son, the intended guests refused to attend. Yet, the royal banquet hall is full of many people, rich and poor, good and bad, saints and sinners. The parable affirms all people's worth, those seen to be the least and those thought to be the greatest. In the biblical world, eating together was a sign of friendship. Therefore, they criticized Jesus for eating with tax collectors and sinners, something His accusers would never have done.

Jesus found joy in other people because he saw them all as children of God. Jesus saw himself as a co-worker with God, inviting people into the only kingdom that endures and provides everlasting life. There is no greater joy or sense of fulfillment than seeing hurting, lost, and lonely people find hope and purpose in faith. The secret of happiness is to step out of the picture yourself and focus on other people and their needs. Jesus prefers that we put needy people first ahead of Him in our concerns. Jesus has a king say, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." (Mt 25:40)

So, when we become tired of the struggles in life, take a moment to reflect on the great blessing it is to be alive, hearing the Gospel and being a member of Christ's church. Think about the benefit of living in a country built on freedom. Consider the blessing of getting an education that trains and inspires our minds. Be thankful for the gift of having a roof over our heads and food on our table.

We have so much for which to be thankful. Even the demands of life we experience ought to be celebrated rather than burdens resented. We should be grateful for all of God's gifts.

If we accept life as a blessing, we can no longer wallow in self-pity. God bestows upon us more gifts than we deserve and blessed with more than we need. Seeing the goodness of life deepens our sense of gratitude and humility.

Amen!