

October 12, 2014

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.....Amen

"The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited were not worthy"

What is the most special invitation you ever received. Has anyone here ever been invited to the White House, the Consecration of a Bishop? Or to attend the premiere of a film? Would anyone like to share the most special invitation they have ever received?

Pause.....

So..... how did you feel when you received that invitation? Honored, proud, maybe a little bit nervous? Did anyone simply chuck it in the bin or say, "Sorry, it's on a Saturday and I really must catch up on my favorite TV show? "

Of course not. You cancelled dates in the diary, you made an appointment with the barber or hairdresser, and most importantly of all you replied to those little letters RSVP. From that point on, you spent the next few months looking forward to that event, planning, preparing, even lying awake at night thinking what it was going to be like.

Let us consider these feelings and the whole theme of invitation as we think about Matthew's gospel this morning. It is the story of a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son.

Who was the king in those days? On one level the king was the sort of political leader the crowds hearing this story would have been very familiar with – often we read they were petty tyrants who got upset and were quite happy to burn down cities when their will is refused. That was what politicians were like in those days.

Once again as we read of events 2,000 years ago, so little has changed.

On another level the king in the story today stands for none other than God Himself. We know this because on many occasions Jesus talked about life in God's kingdom as a feast.... a banquet.....a party. Indeed Jesus Himself often spent time in people's home sharing food and drink, talking and laughing and telling those stories that would later be written down as great pearls of wisdom called parables.

Does that surprise you? I guess when you talk to most people about the Christian faith, they think of dull, dreary religion taking place in dull, dreary buildings with dull, dreary ministers like me droning on at the front.

Or else they think of people trying to live by all kinds of rules and regulations and pointing out the faults and failings of others. But that is not the image of the Christian faith that Jesus ever, ever uses. For what Jesus came to give us was not religion, not rules, but a living relationship with God Himself.

Jesus came to invite us to know God the maker of heaven and earth as Father. He came to offer us forgiveness of sins and a deep, inner peace through His death in our place on the cross. He came to promise all who believed in Him the gift of the Holy Spirit and the joy of life eternal. And that's why He compared

life in God's kingdom to a party. The Christian faith was never meant to be dull and dreary, and I am truly sorry if that's ever been your experience of church and believers. It was meant to be full of life and color and indeed to give us the very real sense of having discovered the purpose for which each and every one of us has been created – to know and love God for ourselves

The great tragedy, and it's one that Jesus describes in this story here, is that perhaps even more people today than all those years ago, so many people decide to ignore the invitation that God sends them.

On a personal level this makes me sad, because failing to attend the banquet one misses so much of the glory of really living.

In John's Gospel, Jesus says, **I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.** And He still says that today, offering to meet all our deepest desires for acceptance, forgiveness, and so much besides. Yet what so often is the typical response? A shrug of the shoulders, maybe, or an "I don't have time for all that stuff".

If those of you who have read "The Black Dog" will bear with me, I would like to relate one story of how God invited me to the Banquet, and out of my deepest misery and with divine help I made it to the celebration. My life has changed ever since that moment....and it continues to change.

I remember the month as being November, because my Mother always said that if something bad was going to happen to us as a family, it was usually in November. It was the late 1990s when I experienced the worst attack of anxiety and depression I had ever encountered.

I remember waking very early in the morning and making my way downstairs to the kitchen. I felt as if I was going to die but I remember thinking it was too early to either wake my wife Karen or the kids or call Bob, my counselor.

I felt immersed by negative thoughts; it was as if I was standing in a large water tank and water was pouring in on me. As the water became deeper and deeper I knew I was going to drown in the waters of my own uncontrollable negative emotions.

I began to panic, and at the very moment when I feared that this might be the end of my life, I realized there was another person or entity in the tank alongside of me.

This other person held my hand tightly and said quite clearly, I will never forget the words, "John if this is the worst that the depression can do to us, and then we will both be just fine".

The Black Dog stood watching through the glass of the water tank with a look of disappointment and frustration. But there was still a look in his eye that said, "John, I am not finished with you, and you will never see the back of me". But the Dog was never the same after this experience.

I discerned the presence of the awesome power of the Holy Spirit in that experience.

The water receded, as did my sense of fear and dread. I climbed out of that water tank and from that moment forward depression began to lose its power over me.

The Black Dog was challenged by the Greatest Power in the Universe and the Dog lost, hands down.

To this day I remember exactly how I felt, when I became convinced of God's invitation to the banquet.....and my acceptance.

Nor even is it in one sense a story. It is actually a description of how the living God is calling each of us....not the person sitting next to us, or the long-standing church member who's been here for donkey's years. We are all invited to share in the life of His kingdom, to experience the love, the joy, the peace, the forgiveness that comes through believing in His Son Jesus.

So, at the end of the day....what is our response? A shrug of the shoulders? Walking off in the other direction?

Or is it a "yes" that's more than just words, but a new attitude of heart and mind and will..... as you give your life to our Lord?

That is the question each one of us needs to know how to answer.
I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. Take the challenge and respond today.....Amen