

Sermon – Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 22: 1-14

Hope, especially Christian hope, is a bedrock of our lives of faith. Hope in theological terms is very much tied up with what we call “The last things,” or in theological terms the *eschatology*. Much of our Christian faith and hope is based on the promise that Jesus Christ will return to earth to raise us all up on the last day.

The apostle Paul declared in his letter to the Romans (8: 24) that “in hope we are saved.” In a papal encyclical titled *Spe salvi*, or ‘saved through hope,’ Pope Benedict XVI draws from this verse from Paul’s letter to the Romans. Pope Benedict says that Christian hope, “is a principle which enables human beings to cope with the ambiguities of existence by reaffirming the loving presence of God in life’s shadows.” God is a god of love, who continues to love us to the end of time, and accompanies us through the good times and the dark times.

We are currently living through a significant ‘time of trial.’ The pandemic continues around the world unabated and in our own community infection rates are rising once again. Our lives have been transformed forever, many people have lost loved ones and friends, many have lost their jobs and businesses and still we have possibly another year to go before we can hope to be in the clear after a vaccine has been widely distributed.

In parallel with the pandemic of course is our own election season coming to a head on November 3. It has been an ugly campaign and the final three weeks promise to be no different. The country has been growing ever so more divided and we know that with disunity comes death. “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand,” Jesus told his disciples (Matthew 12:25). We are not immune from the adverse effects of a divided country, no matter how much we might want to hide away.

Hope, at least for me, that better days lie ahead is what is keeping me going. For without the hope that life will get better for everyone, we can become weighed down with darkness and despair. We put our trust in our loving God, who incarnate in Jesus Christ, also lived through terribly painful times. In the fullness of Jesus’ life he understood he would have to live through suffering, darkness and death before emerging from the tomb to give hope to his disciples and friends that his defeat of death would be the salvation of all.

Hope culminates for many of us in the promise that we will be raised up to heaven on the last day and find our place in the community of saints who surround the heavenly throne of Jesus.

The kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God, as the apostle Mark records it, is a place a lot of people feel is in the future. Many believe it is a place that ‘good’ people go to after they die.

Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, tells them that they are “citizens of heaven,” drawing a distinction between non-believers who, he says are firmly grounded in earthly things. For

believers, being a citizen of heaven, is to be partly in heaven now. Paul writes in the present tense, the now, not that we *will* become citizens of heaven, something that will happen in the future.

This is the tension of the 'now' and the 'not yet,' that reflects out lives of faith. The Lord's Prayer Jesus taught us says that "His will be done, *on earth as it is in heaven.*" I won't get into the detail of the theology of heaven but suffice to say our faith tells us that heaven arrived in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, but will not reach fulfillment until the last days.

So it is fitting that the Apostle Matthew records in his telling of the life of Jesus, what Jesus said about heaven. A dominant theme in the preaching of Jesus is the coming of the kingdom of God. If you have been following along with our gospel readings these past few months you would have heard a number of parables about the kingdom of heaven. Jesus was very forthright in revealing the nature of the kingdom of heaven to his disciples, the chief priests and Pharisees.

At least eleven times Jesus offers up an illustration of the kingdom of heaven. First we have the likenesses - a mustard seed, yeast, treasure in a field, fine pearls, a net that catches fish, a landowner and a place where only a few will enter. Likewise, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven with the person who throws good seed into the field. He compares it to a king who wished to settle his accounts. Today in our gospel reading we have the kingdom of heaven compared to a king who wants to throw a wedding banquet for his son.

When Jesus throws up a comparison for the kingdom of heaven it is usually with a person, in this case a king. So it would be natural for us to identify the king with God. But we need to be a little cautious in leaping to this connection. Consider today's parable. The king first was enraged that the invited guests had decided not to attend his son's wedding banquet. Seems somewhat appropriate to be upset by being stood up by all the guests. But then the king takes revenge. He sends his troops to destroy them and then burns their villages. Mmm. I'm not sure if I like this king any more. Do you?

Finally after the servants go out in the streets and market places to invite in replacement guest, the good and the bad of the community, they had a full wedding hall. But the king noticed one of the guests had sat down without putting on a wedding robe. He must have stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb.

Rather than being grateful that the man had come in to celebrate the wedding, the king turned on him and asked him how did he get in without the robe. The man was silent. The king then instructed his attendants to "bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." The king hardly sounds like the person with the attributes I understand God to possess – love, forgiveness, mercy, justice and the like. These are the attributes that flowed from God incarnate, Jesus Christ.

So we should reconsider the parable once again. One of the things we know about Jesus' parables is that they are often not what they seem on the surface. Jesus spoke this parable to the Chief Priests and the Pharisees, who often did not get the meaning because 'they will indeed listen, but not understand, and they will look but never perceive.'

The issue of violence in this parable, and a similar portrayal of violence in the other two comparisons Jesus makes of the kingdom of heaven, must make us sit up and ponder these comparisons more deeply. All may not be as it seems.

So who else in the parable might reflect the known image of God for us. The only other key person is the man at the end who came in at the last moment but didn't have his wedding robe with him. He stuck out from all the other guests which drew the king's attention and ire. And when he was questioned by the king about his lack of proper attire he was silent. Does this remind you of anyone else?

Jesus was silent before Caiaphas, the high priest, when we was being accused of stirring up trouble, and then before Pilate and the chief priests and elders. Jesus was silent like the lamb before slaughter. And this man at the wedding was silent before he was accused, bound and thrown out of the wedding into the darkness.

The apostle Paul taught that heaven became manifest on earth in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. This was the 'now.' Heaven as a place of final hope had arrived but many had to be shown the way to get there. Jesus' death and resurrection was another milestone in the evolution of heaven. We remain living in the 'not yet' time, the time between his incarnation and the final coming where he will raise us all up on the last day.

Jesus' life was full of wonder but also full of suffering. He was rejected often, mistreated, loved and cared for, before being finally abandoned by his friends and berated and killed by the religious and state leaders. Suffering is part of our journey in and to heaven. Jesus endured it. We now have to endure it.

Heaven on earth comes to us in glimpses and experiences. Heaven is a community, a place of togetherness, not a place of isolation and loneliness. When we come together to worship God, to sing praises and hear scripture, we are in that liminal place where heaven and earth merge, the closest we can be to our loving God, before we are raised up.

So the kingdom of heaven can be compared to the man who came to the feast just as he was, was accused by the king, remained silent before him, then suffered the indignity of being thrown out of the feast into the outer darkness of isolation and separation. Suffering is a part of life but we maintain a strong sense of hope that through our suffering, we endure in community with one another, we endure in heaven now, the present inauguration, before we will be raised up to be with the saints in the final heaven on the last day, the fulfillment of the kingdom, a final community of love and welcome, the kingly rule of God.

