

Homily for October 12, 2008, 28th Sunday (A)
Father Joseph T. Nolan

There are two parables here, and we get the first one wrong if we think it refers to the Hebrews as missing out on salvation or the coming of the messiah, while the gentiles are snugly home. Or rather, seated at the banquet, guests of the king. Rather, think of ourselves. We are all invited at the life's end to the heavenly banquet and no one would like to miss it. But the parable is about the kingdom of God. And that means we are invited to bring it about, with God's help—a way of living and loving with Jesus as a model. We can make a lot of excuses for not getting involved, for taking lightly or paying small attention to what Jesus and the gospels say about a lifestyle, about reconciliation, the warnings against accumulating things, the dangers of greed, and the need to be concerned for the needy, even for the desperate and despairing in our midst. Oh, we have plenty of excuses—and the danger is that they can harden into a way of life that leaves one relatively uninterested or unresponsive to the gospel, or the prodding of the Holy Spirit.

The second parable, the guest at the banquet without a wedding garment obviously symbolizes something—but what? In the old days this was often given a moralistic interpretation. It went like this: the wedding garment represented the state of grace. Without it you could not be admitted to heaven. In plain language, you were lost. The wedding garment also reminded many listeners of the white garment put over a child in baptism. This too represented the state of grace or innocence that one hoped would not be stained by sin. This garment must be kept immaculate. Stainless. Pure. Certainly if it were stained by mortal sin, at least unrepented mortal sin, this was equivalent to losing one's soul. Is this interpretation still correct?

No. It may still be around, but it shouldn't be. The problem, a serious one, is that this approach makes the struggle between good and evil too simple. Anyone who has lived life very long knows full well that it is more complicated than that. To some

extent we all get stained with evil. We all lose our innocence. This term is even used loosely in the sense of growing up, coming out of childhood into adolescence. When the moral life was put solely in terms of the state of grace or mortal sin, everything either white or black, it rightly seemed impossible for anyone to live humanly. If you doubt that, remember how strict the code was on such things as so-called "bad thoughts."

What does all this have to do with the white garment in the parable? It should keep us from giving it a simplistic or moralistic interpretation. It better symbolizes the virtue of charity or love, which should envelope us all.

We should not forget the passage from Isaiah—his images of a mountain, a peaceable kingdom, and a banquet. These are high poetry. And they are true—indeed they are the only way, by metaphor, that we can apprehend something of the splendor of heaven, eternal life. Here is Isaiah's thought again, drawn from all his writing:..

Come to the feast.
I have made the earth a garden
of flowers and delights,
of rich foods and choice wines.
The grape is pressed,
the harvest gathered.
Call in the friend, the passerby.
Find the forgotten, the friendless.
Let there be no sorrow, no weeping.
Come in to my feast!

You with the weapon, put it down
You with the clenched fist, open it
There is a veil over your eyes.
I will remove it.
It has kept you from seeing
that you are all my children
that I have desired you,
in all your variety,
to be the bride of my son.

Come, then, all you
begotten of my love.
My house is open,
the table spread.
The bridegroom waits.