

## First Things First!

### The Epistle

*1 St. John iii.13 Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you. 14 We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. 15 Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him. 16 Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. 17 But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? 18 My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. 19 And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him. 20 For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. 21 Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God. 22 And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight. 23 And this is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment. 24 And he that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him. And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us.*

### The Gospel

*St. Luke xiv.16 Then said he unto him, A certain man made a great supper, and bade many: 17 And sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready. 18 And they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it: I pray thee have me excused. 19 And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them; I pray thee have me excused. 20 And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come. 21 So that servant came, and shewed his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the blind. 22 And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room. 23 And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. 24 For I say unto you, That none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper.*

I am still intending to commence a teaching on the Church during the Trinity Season, as I stated last week. But today's Propers (the Epistle & Gospel) contain elements that seem to beg for our attention. They involve attitudes of preparedness for the mission of the Church, so they rightly should be dealt with before we launch into a detailed study of the Church's structure. Until we are thoroughly ready to adopt the perspectives that are practically shouted at us through the words of today's texts, further progress in ministry is moot. Any attempt to escape them, to go by them, to get around them, because they are in their way very uncomfortable, will get us nowhere, at all. No discussion of growth or outreach can be fruitful without reviewing these concepts and accepting them as ground rules for anything we hope to do, or to be.

*My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.* This is the crux of it. *Love* is the certification to others, and even to our own hearts, as the Epistle reminds us, of that which we confess by words that we believe. Nothing even in ordinary life is

valid without appropriate certification. I could say I'm a doctor, as some have done, or a validly licensed bus-driver, or a lobster fisherman, without documented proof, but it wouldn't hold up in court. The world establishes standards, and rightfully demands that they be uniformly adhered to, because if they aren't, the consequence is disorder and social breakdown. Those who violate these standards, once discovered, are subject to legal consequences, along with the shame that society heaps upon those who forge lies about their professions.

If one were being cynical about it, one might say that the Church exists in a safe zone regarding this matter of the validation of its credentials. The church could declare that it loves, but if it didn't actually do so, the world would react with yawning indifference, since it has, on some level, resigned itself to what it has viewed as a great discrepancy between preaching and practice. No one will bother calling the church to account, because their expectations are so low, to begin with. This might save the church from vocal criticism, but it would be replaced instead by an ominous and condemning silence born out of an ennui convinced that the church will never do differently. This, of course, is an abject state of affairs, even if things appear to roll on peacefully and merrily unaffected.

*But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.*

How these words come back to plague and goad! But how important they are!

Today's Gospel provides us with a related theme, and it is in the realm of personal excuses for avoiding the will of God. Tied in with the topic of this sermon, it means the substituting of God's agenda with our own. Basically, the guests invited to the *great supper* had more important things in their own estimation to do than to attend. Perhaps their social standing in the community was affirmed sufficiently for them by merely having been invited to this renowned event. Maybe they had plans to frame the invitation, and stick it on the wall next to other self-affirming accolades they boasted of.

Taken in its original context, our Lord used this story to condemn those of His time who refused the coming Messianic banquet by rejecting the Messiah Himself. In the parallel account in St. Matthew 22:1-14, those originally called to the feast not only refuse to come but greet the heralds with violence and even murder.

For today's purposes, however, let's think of the *great supper* as the ministry and work of the Church, and especially its mission to *love*. It is a supper that calls for the setting aside of personal time to meet the needs of One infinitely greater than we are, and to obey His commandment to go out and meet the needs of those we esteem as much less than ourselves. He offers a banquet, but it must be on His terms. We don't like the terms, so we refuse to attend, or we attend insofar as it suits us, and so retain our control over the circumstance. Any of this, of course

causes the *master of the house to be angry*. The result is the displacement of the original invitees *by the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind*. Pride and dismissal of the master's will have brought dishonor to those who had honored themselves, and those who were in great and unqualified need of the master's generosity and hospitality received the chance to gladly take their place. It is an irony of no small proportions!

If the *great supper* is the great gift to us of God's Church, wherein we receive its rites, the warmth of fellowship, biblical teaching, and the comfort and security of faith, it is a supper that possesses with it the provision of a response. It would not do to sit down, eat, arise full, and march out. For this would do the Host as much despite as if we had refused to attend, in the first place. No, we are to *love*, which is the only evidence that we ever actually attended the Meal, in obedience to the invitation that had been issued. It is a meal whose only real value is in how it is shared with others.

There are, of course, levels in which using the Gospel parable as an analogy of the Church don't work. Those who refused to attend remained in complete ignorance of both the Master and anything more he might have wished or hoped for them. They remained self-impo- verished, for had they gone to eat, they would have immediately discovered that their own in- volvements, no matter how compelling, paled in comparison with the glory and wonder of their Host's fare, and the pleasure of his personal presence. Those of us who have responded to the invitation have at least gone part of the way in honoring the Master, but He wishes us to act in the place of His servants, entering *quickly into the streets and lanes of the city*, to find those who would never have dared hope that they might be included among the guests, and to warmly re- ceive them.

Let's return again to the Epistle: *We know that we have passed from death unto life, be- cause we love the brethren... ; we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren*. St. John instructs us about the actual nature and quality of this *love* that is to be the chief mark of our membership in Christ's Body. This is indeed... *loving in deed*. This is love of the highest quality. And I think, although the eyes of our contemporaries have in many respects been dulled to that which is truly valuable, by the cheapness and shoddiness that everywhere surround us, there remains within them an instinct for the real. This is love that says loudly, "I consider you more important than I am. I am here to serve you. To wash your feet. To set aside my own dreams in order to give you who have few, or none, the opportunity to have some of your own. To have no life, so you can have a life, and to trust God to provide me with life, as a result."

There is an unexpected result of such love, and it is the strengthening of our own faith in God: *And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him*. How often we wonder about the true state of our souls, if we dared to admit it! How uncertain we are

of their final disposition! But in loving with self-sacrificing love, we accomplish two goals, one directed outward to others, and the other directed inward, to our very own hearts.

There is no point in talking church unless we are prepared to deliver up the goods. Doing so demonstrates *keeping his commandments, and doing those things that are pleasing in his sight*. Are we asking and praying for growth? *And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him*, but only on condition of obedience.

If we refuse the Master's invitation, we will surely have both Him and man to answer to, the anger of one, and the scorn of the other. The status quo must always be established for the Church by His Word, and never by common practice!

We are only at the very beginning of where we need to be. Let us show ourselves no mercy until we make sufficient progress in these things so that it is perceptible to God, to one another, and to our own consciences.

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*