

2020 28th SUNDAY

Monsignor Purcell, who was the Parish Priest of St. Mary's in Hamilton back in the 1970's, is reputed to have asked that today's first Reading be read at every funeral he conducted. And it is not hard to understand why. The Reading gives us a wonderful hope as we face the reality of death.

Isaiah compares heaven to a banquet of succulent food and rich, well-strained wine. It is described as a place where there is no sorrow or shame. All who are present are exultant. The Peace of the Lord rests over all.

So many modern-day people seem to despair of their future. With the possibility of contracting Covid-19, the degradations brought about by climate change, the growing power of gangs and escalating racial anger, they have a pervading sense of hopelessness. What is the point of life?

The most precious gift we have as a Christian community to offer people of our age is our gift of Christian hope. We, as sons and daughters of God, believe that at death we will come to share eternal life with God, a God of infinite love. Preparing for this is the point of life.

In heaven our minds will be wondrously illuminated. We will behold God as God is and our hearts will be suffused with love. We will enjoy the friendship of Mary, the angels, the saints and our treasured loved ones, as together with them we are drawn deeper and deeper into the Being of God.

To convey the hope of heaven, Jesus, in today's Gospel, uses the picture of a spectacular Wedding Feast- the Wedding Feast for the son of a King.

It is a time of laughter and joy- of generosity and plenty, of family-love and at-homeness.

Jesus' parable depicting heaven is very similar to the words we have read from the Prophet Isaiah.

But the parable contains a salutary warning. Heaven will not be a free-for-all. It was Jesus, Himself, Who taught us to pray: "Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Will be done on Earth as it is in heaven." In heaven God's Will is to be done.

The downfall for the guest in the parable who did not wear a Wedding Garment was his defiance of the king's authority. His action was one of flagrant disrespect.

In Jesus' day- when guests entered the hall in preparation for a Wedding, they were expected to be wearing a special white garment. If they did not have such a garment, the host was expected to offer them one to wear. These days, for example, a guest might be given a carnation to wear on the lapel of their suitcoat or on the shoulder of their dresses as they enter a Wedding function.

In refusing to wear the white garment, the Wedding Guest was defying the host and devaluing the dignity of the event. His action was indefensible. When confronted, all he could do was to remain silent.

Jesus is teaching, then, that Heaven is not a place where we can enter and do our own thing. Heaven is God's Kingdom. It is a place where all are called to a life of ever-deeper intimacy with God- which is impossible for those with rebellious or self-centred hearts.

God yearns for all people to enter heaven. As Isaiah said: "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will prepare a banquet for all people." Yes, we are all welcome; but before entering we must first accept the Lordship of God.

How accurately this part of the parable reflects the decision of so many modern-day New Zealanders.

On the TV1 Breakfast show a few days ago all three presenters were highly critical of Judith Collins' action of kneeling for a minute or two in prayer before she cast her vote. But what upset me was that two of the presenters who mocked Judith Collins for praying owned to having attended Catholic Schools as youngsters- clearly implying that now as adults, they had seen through all the God-talk they had been taught and found Judith Collins action of praying totally archaic.

I asked myself, 'Why were they so upset at the sight of a political leader praying?' At School they had been taught the importance of centring their lives on God. But, clearly, they had thrown off their Wedding Garments and now scoffed at the very idea of prayer.

The promise of heaven gives us a wonderful hope. But to enter we must freely acknowledge God's sovereignty. We must say to God: "Thy Will be done."

God will keep on inviting us to accept His Lordship for as long as we live on Earth. I pray that those two TV presenters will undergo 'metanoia' and open their hearts to God someday soon; or at least before they die.

