**28th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Cycle A**

Isaiah 25: 6-10a; Phil 4: 12-14, 19-20; Matthew 22: 1-14

October 11/12, 2014

We here today are more than just a parish. We are more than just a local community. We are part of the diocesan Church, united under our bishop as our shepherd.

Not only are we, as a parish, bound together with other parishes in the diocese, but our diocese is bound together with other dioceses in the world, under one shepherd, the Pope, who is Christ’s Vicar on earth. Because we are ultimately one Church, one faith, one baptism, one People of God, we have responsibilities to each other throughout the world. We are, then, Catholic, universal and complete.

As our Holy Father, Pope Francis, reminds us, we cannot forget our brothers and sisters who live in places where they are being systematically persecuted and killed because they are Christians.

In our first reading today, we hear of God providing for his people on the mountain. I could not help but think of persecuted Christians in northern Iraq who in recent weeks have fled from their homes and communities and run to a mountain, seeking refuge from the death and violence that have surrounded them by extremist groups in that region of the world. Yes, indeed, a dark veil hangs over all the Christians in that country. Terrorists threaten them all. The Holy Father has asked us to pray for them and to assist them.

God wants to wipe away every tear on their faces, as we heard in our reading today. God has promised them a great feast of choice foods and drinks. God’s hand is on the mountain of their refuge in Iraq, just has God’s hand has been present in every other place of death and persecution of Christians throughout the centuries. Even though they walk in a very dark valley, God is with them.   
  
In Iraq, just as he has here in the United States, God has prepared a great feast filled with his choicest gifts, a feast He has offered to all people; ***all people***. I am speaking of the gift of the Church and specifically the Eucharist, which we call the Mass. I am talking about the gifts of the seven sacraments and the ordained clergy in apostolic succession. Yes, God has given the people of Iraq the gift of the Catholic Church as a source of grace and strength. All has been prepared by God. In Iraq, as in other places of the world, the parable we heard in today’s Gospel is being played out. The parable is being carried out. It is at its beginning, maybe nearing its midpoint.

So many have been invited to take part in the banquet for so many centuries in that land, a land that was a fertile place for the Church for over 2000 years to grow. Now, it nears annihilation. Why has this happened? Why are they persecuted and why are they dying? We certainly need to ask ourselves, “Why are they persecuted?”

I don’t know really. I can only guess, but if we look at today’s Gospel parable, maybe it explains it a bit.

In recent generations, what began so many centuries ago as a Christian nation has turned away from its roots. Some have followed radical extremist groups under the guise of a religion, which in fact is no religion but rather an expression of hate and violence.

I wonder sometimes if it is always the same two things that turn someone away from the Church, from God’s gifts and graces, i.e., either ignorance and apathy or anger and blindness to the truth.

What can we do, knowing of this tragic situation for Iraqi Christians?

First, we must remember them, and pray for them. We remember by speaking of them; we pray for them by bringing their needs to the Mass in our private intentions.

Second, we must never presume our own worthiness to come to the feast prepared for us by God. We must not become like the man in today’s Gospel who came but had to leave because he was apathetic and did not prepare himself to come and was not dressed properly. We must not become lazy, ignorant or apathetic with the great gift of the Eucharist and the Church; rather, we must accept the invitation to come and come prepared. And we must never give into anger and resentment. If we become careless in our worship here, if we become worse angry or resentful, then we will no longer reach out to our hurting brothers and sisters in our midst, or in the world at large in places of great persecution. In other words, we must be always be prepared to come worthily to the Mass which God has so richly prepared for us.

At each Mass, we need to bring to this altar not only our own needs, but the needs of the universal Church, especially the needs of our persecuted brothers and sisters.

Do you think of these things when you come to Mass on Sunday? Are you prepared for the banquet feast? Do you pray ahead of time for the needs of the poor, the persecuted, and the needy? In other words, do you put on the garment of Christ, the garment you need to have on, to enter into the banquet of life and love? Or do we just show up, or worse, decide to come only once in a while and then ill-prepared?

Let us this day remember our Christian brothers and sister in war torn areas of the Mideast. May our prayers, the way we approach the Eucharist, and our gratitude for the gift of the Church, serve to strengthen them in their need.