

Homily for October 10, 1999
28th Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle A

By Father Charles Bowes

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

God's mercy is ours to embrace.

What gives with the king in this gospel story of Matthew 22? First he invites wedding guests indiscriminately – the good, the bad, and the ugly – from the highways and byways. Then the one guest arrives in the wrong party clothes; the king has the guest thrown back into the dark, dank street from which the person was recruited. This has never been a very attractive story for me. It seems somewhat mercurial and vindictive. Why invite people to the banquet if you're going to reject them? Were not all called and welcome?

It is understandable that those who absolutely reject Christ and the bounty of his saving banquet are not included. They do not even want to come to the party. But the rest – all those who do not resist the possibility that God calls them to the eternal feast – are welcomed.

So why are some people who are already in the promised banquet-land excluded for the feeble-sounding reason that they are improperly dressed?

What has helped me understand this odd state of affairs is C.S. Lewis's wonderful fantasy, *The Great Divorce*, which he wrote to suggest that the option between heaven and hell is a radical choice we all have.

In this short, allegorical story, it turns out that a group of people, after a long bus ride, find themselves in a strange location. It is the vestibule of heaven itself, a place they have all generally wanted to go. The problem is that they must now believe that they are actually there. They must accept the fact that God really saves them.

Lewis develops a lively drama for each traveler's life. All they need to do is to "put on" the armor of salvation to receive it; yet many of them cannot bring themselves to believe that they are in banquet-land. They would rather cling to the defenses with which they have covered themselves during their lives. One self-pitying chap, unwilling to let go of the mantle of his own righteousness, just cannot bring himself to trust that he is actually within the gates of Paradise. He grips his resentment so tightly that he disappears into the small dark hole of his egotism.

Another poor soul wears a small, slimy red lizard on his shoulder, a twitching, chiding garment of shame and disappointment. This lizard is his clothing, his self-image and self-presentation to the world. It is a symbol, Lewis leads us to believe, of some sin of lust, which the

pilgrim's soul both hugs for identity and carries for self-pity.

An angel approaches, offering to kill the slimy creature, which protests that if he is killed, the soul will surely lose his life and meaning. The ghost soul, encouraged by the angel, finally lets go of the lizard, but only with trembling fear. He gasps out a final act of trust: "God help me. God help me."

And with that plea, a mortal struggle ensues, the lizard mightily resisting while a wondrous metamorphosis happens. The lizard is transformed into a glorious creature. Lewis writes: "What stood before me was the greatest stallion I have ever seen, silvery white, but with mane and tail of gold.... The new-made man turned and clapped the new horse's neck In joyous haste the young man leaped upon the horse's back. Turning in his seat he waved a farewell, then nudged the stallion with his heels." They both soar off like shooting stars, into the mountains and valleys.

What happened to this wayfarer at the vestibule of the banquet is that he finally clothed himself in Christ rather than in his shame. Having nothing of his own, not even his sins to cling to, he abandoned himself to the "God help me" of radical trust.

If it is God's will that we all be saved in Jesus, then it is for us, clothed in faith, hope and love, to accept God's will as our own. Perhaps this is the meaning of Jesus' parable, as well as of Lewis's.

Are not our efforts to share our time and talent steps in the much larger journey of beginning to trust, to let go, to place everything in God's hands? Is not our journey to this table both an effort and a source of strength to utter those oh so necessary words: "God help me"?

God's mercy is ours to embrace.