

## WHY REFUSE THE INVITATION

Early in April 1973, I learned that John Cardinal Krol had agreed to call me and forty-four of my classmates to be ordained to the priesthood on Saturday May 19, 1973. Because there were so many of us, the largest diocesan ordination class in the world that year, there were only a limited number of invitations to attend the ordination ceremony itself, about thirty per priest. They were like gold those thirty invites and in our family we carefully discussed to whom they would go. My parents, my sister and brothers and their spouses, my grandparents, assorted aunts and uncles, some would travel over a thousand miles to come to be present. There was a small reception afterwards. The next day I would celebrate my First Mass in my home parish and there were many more invitations to that event and to that reception. I imagine it is similar to what a bride and groom go through when they get married.

My uncle, my Godfather, had divorced his wife and married another woman. It was a family trauma and although he and my father had worked together they had a falling out over that and other issues. My father left to begin working on his own. An invitation to the ordination was sent to my uncle. It was returned unopened. He was not coming to the ordination or to the banquet. Why not? I am unsure. Perhaps he did not believe his wife would be welcome. I do not know. By then his first wife had died. I do know he had no part in our festivities or celebration. There was no sharing in the joy of that day.

Why don't people gratefully and graciously respond to invitations they receive? I am sure there are reasons. It definitely happens. Enough that Jesus could create a whole story about such refusals and use it as an illustration about the very kingdom of God breaking in to our world. Jesus uses the imagery of a king hosting a wedding banquet for his son and his beloved bride. Who is the king? Jesus says that the kingdom of God is LIKE A CERTAIN KING so the thinking here is that the King is God the Father. His son? Jesus of Nazareth? But he never married. Who is the bride, his beloved spouse to be? You are. I am. We are. All of us who love him and believe in him. The Father wants to celebrate this union, this love affair between God and us with a wonderful banquet. We will call it heaven.

But it doesn't make sense that any person would refuse such an invitation. Who would ever refuse to go to heaven? It really doesn't make sense. And it didn't make sense when my uncle refused my invitation. But there is more than a refusal here. There is rejection. There is resentment. There is the manhandling of the servants. There is even the killing of some. You can sense the bitterness, the subterranean fury and rage at even being invited. Enough to act out in anger. Enough to lash out. You can keep your stinking heaven as far as I'm concerned. Look at this mess on earth you've left us. Why do you allow all this suffering and hatred to go on? What kind of God are you anyway? Who can believe in you? Who would even want to, thank you very much?!

My friends. When did all this happen? When did the Father send such an invitation? When all this resentful rejection? When was that? Why, it wasn't in the past. It just happened, very recently. Actually, today. You mean right now, in the midst of a pandemic? Right in the midst of the most contentious presidential election? Right now during this time of emotional and

economic upsetment? Yup. Right now. But there is so much going on. So much important stuff going on. Who can step back from all of this and realize that God is inviting us into something wonderful and life-changing and restorative? Even in the face of such hatred and vitriol? Yes. Even now. Who can believe this? We can. You and I can. We must. We must realize that the way of Jesus is the only way even when so many have rejected it and have failed to embrace it as a way of life. We cannot reject it. We cannot abandon his teaching. We are to choose to live his way. Even today. Even now. Even in the midst of all of this turmoil and uncertainty. We may be uncertain but God is not.

Jesus's story goes on, however. The king sends his army and destroys those who refuse to come to the banquet. The army is a symbol. The meaning is this: If you choose not to participate in the Father's banquet, then you will undergo destruction and you will die—in your sins. The banquet gives life. Without it you cannot have life, you will not have life. No threat. Just fact.

BUT. There is often a BUT. And we don't like that. BUT you can't just show up and cross the threshold of the banquet hall. The king has some expectations. And the Father has some expectations too. Of those first invited. That they would be receptive and responsive. That they would accept the king's way of living and acting. That is what is meant by the wedding garment. It is a commonplace today for many people to think that they can pretty much live any way they want, do whatever they please and because God is such a good God they can just show up at the end of life and expect a pass to cross the threshold into the kingdom of heaven. It does not work that way. You and I don't work that way.

That is not the story that the bridegroom son tells today. You clothe yourself in him, in Christ. You put on the mind and heart of Christ. You live the way of the bridegroom in your interactions with people. Then the banquet which has been prepared for you will be most welcoming. But don't think you can take any of this for granted. God the Father will not ever be played for the fool. His Son, who has taken on our flesh, lived our life, died our death—that Son—is to be our judge. He will be there at our end. He will look at me. I will look at Him. In a nanosecond He will know and I will know. And He will know that I know and I will know that He knows. There will be the swiftest of judgment. No explanations. No finessing. No pleas for mercy. Not then. Not once death has taken us. Up to that moment, yes. But not after that. Then, what is, is.

So, are you holding out on your response? Who in your family or circle of acquaintances is resentful of the divine invitation? Who resists the way of the Lord? Who bristles at the mention of Eucharist? What are you doing for them? There is much more going on right now than the pandemic and our election. God's Word seeks to break in. Are we paying attention?

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.