

For several weeks now, Jesus has been describing the Kingdom of God to us. Notice that He always refers to the Kingdom in the here and now. The Kingdom is not a promise of the future, something that is yet to come. The Kingdom of God is now and Jesus challenges us to find our place in it.

In the parable of the two sons He asks if we are obedient to His will or do we pay mere lip-service to His teachings while we follow our own desires?

Last week He asked us if we are proper stewards over the vineyard He has given us.

And this week He asks us if we are prepared to rely on God.

It has become popular to preach the self-help gospel, that everything is entirely up to us. The life we have always wanted is right there waiting for us to take it, all we have to do is take action. It is all in our power. This is actually an ancient heresy called Pelagianism. Pelagianism denied the effects of original sin and taught that we can choose good or evil without Divine aid. What many of the self-help and motivational prophets do not realize is that all of our lives here on earth are really a partnership with God.

If we could achieve our life's purpose through our own efforts, by following a formula or certain technique, then Jesus would not have needed to come and save us. But He did.

Original sin not only damaged our nature, it also released evil into the world. The battle that followed, the battle we still fight, is for our fulfillment, our happiness and our meaning in life. It is a battle we cannot win alone, we need the help of God's grace.

The prophet Isaiah looked forward to this day. He described paradise as a work of the Lord. The psalm describes God as a good and wise shepherd, who guides and cares for his needy sheep. Saint Paul tells us that he can do all things through God who gives him strength. To put it another way, without God, we can do nothing. The parable in the Gospel tells us of the destruction of the ungrateful guests who chose not to come to the banquet. They were content to take care of their own little

kingdoms that they had built up for themselves and did not acknowledge the gifts and opportunities that the king had given them.

Nothing is entirely within our control. There is much we can do, and much we have control over. But how much we are able to achieve is dependent upon how much we cooperate with God's will for us.

I do believe we can lead happy, joy-filled, glorious lives right now. It doesn't matter how much money we have, what kind of job we have, the size of the house we live in or the car we drive. We can lead happy lives, content in the knowledge that we are fulfilling the role God put us here to fulfill. We can do this as soon as we choose to cooperate with God's will.

There is only one king, and eternal peace, happiness, and prosperity can only be found in His kingdom.

Our brothers and sisters who have gone ahead of us to the kingdom, the ones we refer to as saints, know this. We call them saints because they recognized that their lives here on earth are meant to be lived as a partnership with God.

One of those saints was a priest who lived in Naples in the 1600s. His name was Francis of Girolamo. On one occasion he woke up in the middle of the night and was prompted by the Holy Spirit to go out and preach. Not in the church or in a crowded street, he was led by the Spirit to a deserted plaza on the outskirts of town. There he was, at 2 or 3 in the morning, preaching, to no one, because he felt called by God to do so.

The next morning, a prostitute came to his confessional to repent of her sins and be received back into the church. It turns out that she heard St. Francis' homily the night before through her bedroom window.

A soul was saved, not by through the efforts of a priest, or even the independent will of the prostitute. A soul was saved by the grace of God.

Jesus told us this in the parable today by including a small, curious detail.

If you were invited to a wedding banquet in ancient Palestine, the host would provide you with some sort of festive garment, it was almost like a welcome gift. It could be as simple as a colored scarf or shawl. This would help create an atmosphere of unity and joy.

In the parable, after the banquet has begun the king comes down to meet his guests and finds one who is not wearing the wedding garment. There are really only two possible reasons for this guest to not be dressed properly.

He may have snuck in, he wasn't invited.

Or he may have decided not wear the garment. He came to the banquet with no intention of behaving appropriately as he was expected to. He didn't really care about the wedding, he just came for the food and drink, all the while continuing to do things the way he wanted to do them.

In either case, the guest was not really a guest at all. He had no relationship with the king or the bride and groom. He had no business being there and when he was discovered, he was thrown out.

When we try to follow Christ without cooperating with His will and the teaching of his Church, we are trying to get into the wedding banquet without wearing the wedding garment. We see people like this all the time. Some of the most prominent people in the country claim to be Catholic but reject certain teachings of the Church.

Christianity does not present us with a choice of what we will believe according to our own personal preferences. It is the revelation of God, and it requires our humility, our trust, and our obedience. We need all of those qualities to discern the reason God has placed us here, the vocation that cooperates with His divine will for us, the unique path offered to each of us for our salvation and happiness.

This is not easy because we are surrounded by a culture that wants us to believe that we do not need God, that we can have everything we want through our own efforts. Some will even preach what is known as the prosperity Gospel; the idea that if we live a good moral life here on earth we will be rewarded with material blessings

and a trouble free life. This idea is so widespread that it is safe to say we have all been affected by it one way or another.

But the reality is that if we follow Christ in everything we are just as likely to meet with persecution as we are to meet with earthly goods.

The joy of Christians does not come from wealth, abundance, health or a blissful life. The joy of Christians comes from following the law that God has placed on the heart of each of us. It comes from finding and fulfilling our purpose. Fighting the good fight, finishing our race, keeping the faith, this is the way to living a glorious life. This is how Saint Paul was able to say “In every circumstance, and in all things, I have learned the secret of being well fed and of going hungry, of living in abundance and of being in need.”

If there is some teaching of the Church that you have difficulty accepting, then please, ask questions. Do not simply reject the teaching and go on with your life, content in the little kingdom you have built up around yourself. God gave us an intellect and the ability to reason precisely because He does not want mindless robots who obey because the Church says so. Ask questions. Find out why the Church teaches what it teaches.

These parables are meant to shock us, to wake us up. When we are invited to the wedding banquet of the lamb will the king come to us and ask, “What are you doing here? Why did you not obey my commandments? Why did you not follow my teachings? Why did you debase my sacraments and de-value life, which is sacred to me? Why have you come so ill-prepared?”

Or will He instead open wide the doors and welcome us into the joy of His house?