

22nd Sunday Year C

Fr Jonathan Jong

Luke 14:1,7-14

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just, he says. To which I am tempted to reply: are we there yet? Not because, mind you, I have racked up enough feasts for the poor, maimed, lame, and blind to qualify for great rewards in heaven, but because this claim seems evasive to my admittedly very short-sighted eyes. I feel like a child, who is constantly asking his mother when he can have those sweets, only to receive in unwavering reply the single ambiguous familiar declaration: later.

What could it mean, after all, to say that we will be rewarded at the resurrection, at the end of history, in an unimaginable future where it is not at all clear that words like “future” or the concept of time make any sense at all? In real terms—that is to say, in the terms of cold, economic logic—it means approximately *nothing*.

I mean, what would you say if I borrowed a large sum of money from you, and said that I would repay you—even with interest—at the resurrection of the just?

It is as though our Lord lacked the psychological insight to know that human beings are dispositionally and incorrigibly bad at deferring gratification. I can barely wait two days for my Amazon parcels to arrive, let alone take the time to find another place to buy my books and dinosaur figurines. Another place, which

does not calculatingly exploit their workers and meticulously avoid their taxes. I can barely wait two days for justice, let alone until the resurrection of the just for my recompense.

Christians are often criticized for what is assumed to be our motivation for doing good: we only do good, they say, to ultimately benefit ourselves. We only do good to curry favour with God or to avoid incurring his wrath. I am sure that there is some truth to this; and yet, just a brief moment's reflection must make us—and them—see how obviously unappealing the deal is. No sensible human being would live the life Jesus demands for *maybe* pie in the sky when they die. We are—human beings are, even the least sensible among us—(are) too shrewd, too cynical, too impatient for that. Christians truly do believe many impossible things, but this—the naïve notion that we ought to be

virtuous for treasures on the other side of eternity—is surely not among them.

The truth is, as usual, even more unusual—even more absurd—than the caricature.

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The scales fell from my eyes when I was about sixteen, reading the Gospel of Matthew. It was that story Jesus told, the one about the workers. Some of them turned up before dawn, and agreed to work for a day's wages. Others turned up looking for work later that morning; others still appeared at midday; others came in the afternoon; and even a mere hour before the working day was done, there were people seeking employment. The guy who ran the vineyard, he paid them all a denarius each, a day's wage.

The gospel, it dawned on me, had—unlike the rest of the world familiar to me at the time and still—(the gospel had) nothing whatsoever to do with cold, hard, economic logic. The gospel, I realised, was opposed to my world of carrots and sticks, rewards and punishments, cost-benefit analyses, just desserts, tit-for-tat strategies for achieving Nash equilibria.

It all suddenly made sense, this God for whom one and one and one made *one*; who tells stories about householders who provide to each according to his needs after receiving from each according to his ability; who has no need for us, but made us anyway, and lived and died for us, who killed him, and rose again to bring us home.

It all suddenly made sense. And the kind of sense it made was, of course, totally and unrepentantly absurd. Sure, Christians

believe impossible things, silly things. We believe that we were and are loved into being; that our primary identity is like that of a child born into a family that had no need for her nor desire or agenda for her except that she flourish. We believe that this love who gave us breath and life came alive among us, and died, and changed all lives forever. All lives: even the lives that don't matter to us, the lives different from us, the lives we would rather marginalise, avoid, or exploit. We believe that all this grand stuff about creation and redemption are as true for them as they could be for anyone else, as they could be for us. And therefore, we believe that we should all sit at table together: not *just symbolically*, on some anaemic definition of symbols, but *really*, in the flesh and the blood. *Invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind.* He's not kidding. I'm not sure why we think he is, though we sure act like it most days; God

knows I do anyway. *Invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind*; God knows he did, invite us in our own impoverished visions of the world, our crippling insecurities, our moral blindness.

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Sometimes it's difficult to know how to apply biblical texts or theological precepts to the modern day, to our every day lives. This is not one of those times. The thing we are called to do and be is difficult, to be sure, but it's not our inability to understand that makes it so. *Invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind*. Not *because* we will be repaid at the resurrection of the just, whenever that might be, but because we are made and saved—sons and daughters of love itself—(made and saved) to defy our basest instincts, even when they are tartered up, made respectable and entrenched as

ostensibly moral or political or economic necessities. *Invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind.* Because our source and sustenance and salvation is love. No hermeneutical lens is required here, no reading between lines. God help us, then, that healed and strengthened at his table, we will be able to open ours.

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