

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time, 11 October 2020

Scriptures: Isaiah 25:6-10a; Philipp.4:12-14,19-20; Matt.22:1-14

Homily: Fr. Ken

The English artist and poet William Blake wrote a poem that, with music by Hubert Parry, has now become a popular song. It is sung at concerts and even sports events. The title is "Jerusalem". It is based on the legend of the child Jesus traveling to England with his supposed uncle, Joseph of Arimathea. The poet wonders whether, by their presence, heaven came to the shores of his country. "Was Jerusalem built here?", he asks.

Jerusalem, the city built on the hill of Zion, was widely understood to represent God's kingdom of heaven. It bears little relation to the sadly fought-over city of history, claimed by the followers of all three major religions: Christians, Moslems, and Jews.

This heavenly Jerusalem is where God dwells eternally and thus is the place of true justice and peace, the shalom for which all creatures long. William Blake contrasts this with the hell on earth brought about in the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century by the mass migration of peoples to the cities. Workers and their families endured terrible conditions in the cramped and unsanitary slums and vast noisy factories, "the dark satanic mills". These Blake compares to the green and pleasant countryside which they had to leave. The second half of the song calls for a return to the life style brought about by the visit of Jesus to the land, and demands the means to undo the injustice, to build Jerusalem in England. To this end, he writes:

*"England! Awake! Awake! Awake!
Jerusalem thy sister calls!
Why wilt thou sleep the sleep of death
And close her from thy ancient walls?"*

Jerusalem, the mountain of the Lord, is the place of God's presence in today's first reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. Just before this passage starts, Isaiah depicts God destroying the power of chaos and of the ungodly world; the poor and the needy of all nations have been saved and have made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to acknowledge God. Here God lays out a wonderful party for them, with the best food and drink imaginable, where they can enjoy each other's company and that of the Lord in person. This brings peace between them, the end of human-inflicted suffering; but more than that, God brings an end to suffering of all kinds, removing the veil of mourning from all people by destroying death itself. The Lord will wipe the tears from our cheeks. Little Israel, an insignificant power compared with the mighty empires surrounding her, has a God who is proved to be the one true God. Israel's loyalty to God has been vindicated, but the benefits are not only for Israel but for all people (that includes us), and the time has now come for celebrating.

This inspired vision of Isaiah anticipates the Christian hope for eternal life. Lest anyone be misled into thinking of eternal life as some kind of never-ending boredom, both this passage and the Gospel use the imagery of the delicious banquet as one of the most fun and enjoyable experiences the human mind could imagine. If we were invited to this feast, would we not jump at the chance. What on earth could stand in our way?

The Gospel asks this question of us—and warns that the experience of others is that when some people have been invited, they have found other concerns too important to bother with the invitation. Some have been hostile to those who delivered it. This can be seen in the fate of many of the prophets of ancient times and of today, and, of course, of Jesus Christ himself. The depiction of the king mounting a military campaign and destroying the city (which is not in Luke's version of the parable) may have been included in Matthew's version to refer to the fall of Jerusalem in the year 70 AD. The words about the unprepared guest can imply that, once people have responded to the invitation by faith and baptism, there

is a follow-up expected of a just life with good works. Membership of the Church alone does not guarantee salvation.

As in William Blake's poem, we are called not to "cease from mental fight", nor to let "the sword sleep" in our hand, until we "have built Jerusalem" where we live. In other words, the kingdom of God is not restricted to one place, one mountain of Zion, but is where we are, is all around us.

The fight is with injustice in our world, with whatever causes unnecessary suffering. It is also within us: the "sword" is a symbol of the courage and strength God gives us to oppose whatever prevents us from hearing the Gospel of justice and peace, of God's unstinting generosity and patience. We may then begin to see God's kingdom, Jerusalem, already here among us, with the celebration already begun.