THE GOSPEL READING
Luke 14:16-24
[Wordly Entanglements, Poor Excuses]

The Lord said this parable: “A man once gave a great banquet, and invited many; and at the time of the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come; for all is now ready.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a field, and I go out and see it; I pray you, have me excused.’ And another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I must go to examine them; I pray you, have me excused.’ And another said, ‘I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.’ So the servant came and reported this to his master. Then the householder in anger said to his servant, ‘Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and maimed and blind and lame.’ And the servant said, ‘Sir, what you commanded has been done, and there is still room.’ And the master said to the servant, ‘Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet. For many are called, but few are chosen.’”

THE SERMON

The Kingdom of God is present with us in Christ, and the Lord invites us to come to communion with Him as the One who prepares and provides all good things for us.
In the Parable of the Great Supper, the Lord Jesus shows us that He calls us to eternal joy in the Kingdom, and the only thing that could ever keep us from enjoying that joyous banquet is our unwillingness to respond. However, God’s call for us to enter His Kingdom never ends, because of His great love for us. In this parable, using the imagery of a feast, Jesus teaches the value of humility: When you are invited by anyone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in the best place . . . For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 14:8-11). The Kingdom of God is prepared for the humble and the meek. The Lord also says: “When you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just” (Luke 14:13-14). The Kingdom of God is not prepared for those who are self-sufficient, but for those who depend entirely on God, in other words, God-sufficient.

Continuing His teaching through the imagery of the banquet, Jesus tells a parable describing: “A certain man [who] gave a great supper, and invited many, and sent his servant at supper time to say to those who were invited, ‘Come; for all things are now ready’” (Luke 14:16-17). The Man in the parable is God the Father, and the Servant is God the Son, the Lord Jesus, who invites us to commune with Him. However, those who were invited all gave excuses and refused to come. We read of three exemplary excuses: one had bought a field (representing the riches of this world), another had bought a yoke of oxen to plow (representing the commitments of this temporal life) and yet another had married a wife (representing the relationships of this world that become more important than our relationship with God).

Of course, there is nothing wrong with buying property, or working and investing in a career, and certainly there is nothing wrong with marriage, which God Himself created. The problem is not with things of commercial and family life, but that those who refused the invitation used these things as excuses, in order to refuse the invitation of God. They heard the call, but “the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches” (Matthew 13:22) became like thorns in their hearts, and they declined the invitation because they preferred the “cares, riches, and pleasures of life” (Luke 8:14) to communion with God. When the invitation from God came for them to be His guests, instead of exercising their faith and responding to His love, they found a myriad of excuses to stay away. As a result, God invited other people to come and eat with Him, to be in union with Him. All people were invited, but only a few responded to the invitation. However, the emphasis of the parable is not on the refusal, but on the readiness of the host (God) to fill the table with the ones who respond, who are the chosen.

In order for us to hear and respond to the call of God, to His unrelenting love, we must always be exercising our spiritual senses, so our hearts desire Him above all things. We need to have these spiritual senses – especially what the Fathers call “the eyes of the soul” (τα μάτια τῆς ψυχῆς) – activated, so we are able to listen to His invitation, to His
calling. Our spiritual senses are an extension of our bodily senses: taste, touch, smell, sound, and sight. With our spiritual senses enhanced, when the grace of God comes to us and calls us, it fills our souls and bodies with spiritual joy. To sharpen our spiritual senses, we must cultivate a calm and attentive stillness before God, which the Fathers call ἑσυχία (in Greek, ἡσυχία), i.e., the practice of contemplative prayer in the mystical tradition of the Orthodox Church. In this way, we follow Jesus’s counsel: “When you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly” (Matthew 6:6).

We open the eyes of our soul when, in stillness, we look inward and cease concentrating on merely physical things, to achieve experiential knowledge of God. How do we exercise these spiritual senses; how do we sharpen our spiritual vision (the eyes of the soul)? By constant prayer, especially in stillness, by participating in the Sacraments, by reading Scripture daily, by reading spiritual books, by almsgiving, and by serving others in the love of Christ. The kingdom to which we are invited is the Kingdom of God, which is to come, and yet is already here with us; it is in our communion with Him, it is in the Eucharist, and it is “within you” (Luke 17:21). Saint Cyril of Alexandria says, “And what was the nature of the invitation? ‘Come: for behold, all things are ready.’ For God the Father has prepared in Christ for the inhabitants of earth those gifts which are bestowed upon the world through Him, even the forgiveness of sins, the cleansing away of all defilement, the communion of the Holy Spirit, the glorious adoption as sons, and the kingdom of heaven.”

When Christ gloriously appears in His Second Coming, as a loving and righteous God, He will judge us according to our response to His invitation. We respond to Him even now by participating in Divine Liturgy, engaging actively in prayer, and living according to the Gospel. At the Final Judgment, there will be surprising revelations; some who we might not think are close to God, are closer to Him than ourselves. In the parable, the honorable people were invited, but they refused, and the ones who were “compelled” to come (by the urgency of the Gospel) were the outcasts – that is, the poor, the maimed, the blind, and the lame. They responded, they showed up, and they entered the Kingdom. God’s love wants all to be saved, because in His love He seeks His people, always, but we must respond.

The only thing that can keep us from the Kingdom of God is our refusal to enter; God calls incessantly, and we must not allow the hardness of the heart, or the desire for things of this life, to keep us from Him. “Many are called, but few are chosen” (Matthew 22:14), and the ones who are chosen are the ones who respond to the call. The word for the ones who are “called” (κλητοὶ) is the root of our word for Church (ἐκκλησία). The Lord even now prepares a banquet for us, in His Body and Blood. Speaking of the banquet, Saint Cyril of Alexandria says, “The Son arose for us: at which time also He suffered
death for our sakes, and gave us His flesh to eat, as being the bread from heaven, which gives life to the world. Towards evening also, and by the light of torches, the lamb was sacrificed, according to the law of Moses. And therefore with good reason the invitation that is by Christ is called a Supper.”

Christ invites us always to His banquet: “Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready . . . Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!” (Revelation 19:7-9). We also commemorate the Forefathers, especially Patriarch Abraham, two Sundays before Christmas. We are reminded of his invitation for a banquet to the Lord and two angels, representing the Holy Trinity, “[Abraham] took butter and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree as they ate” (Genesis 18:8). The scene is immortalized in the Trinity icon by Rublev, also called the Hospitality of Abraham. His communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit was his response to God’s call to him. Do we respond to God as Abraham did? Everything that brings us closer to God is an invitation, but His overarching invitation is: Come and enter My Kingdom.