

Rev. Thomas Clark
Isaiah 25:6-10s
Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20
Matthew 22:1-14

28TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
October 8-9, 2011

When I was here last Sunday at the 11:30 mass, the only mass I was at, I mentioned that this is my first celebration of the liturgy at Epiphany. One connection I had was with Fr. Richard Fowler, who was the first co-pastor of Epiphany, and I spent the last six months of his life with him at St. Francis of Rome when he became too ill to function, so the Archbishop asked me to go there. I stayed there with him actually for five months before he died, and was with him at the point and moment of his death, which is another story altogether, but beautiful. So I just wanted to give you that connection those of you who were here that long ago that remember Fr. Fowler.

I loved the passages today from the scripture from Isaiah 25 and Matthew 22 where the end time that we're kind of in already is depicted as a banquet – a banquet of richest foods and most satisfying drink, choicest wines. Just a nice picture. Have you ever been to a real fancy restaurant on a special occasion? You know that you go there, not to eat, but to dine. And when you dine, you take and savor; every morsel will be relished; every sip will be savored. It's just a beautiful time. Like the rejoicing at a wedding, that's part of our other passage today. So this is the scripture that's brought before us today as we come to celebrate this day.

The prophet Isaiah promises that this feast is for all peoples. He tells us that this will destroy the veil that veils all people. He mentions that the web that is woven over all the nations will be destroyed no more. God will wipe away tears from every person's eyes. What a promise! This new kingdom will be like a wedding feast. The invited refused. It doesn't say why, well exactly. Maybe they found out somebody was going to be there they didn't want to be with. The servants are told to go to the streets, bring in whoever you run into and meet, and gather all that you find – the bad and the good alike. What a picture!

Well, this is what God's dream is for his new reign among us – a lavish banquet of justice and eternal life on a mountain of peace. A dream that's free of veils and webs, of sin that divides people. A mountain and a place that will be free of racism, that division that is based on ethnicity and color we know is a sin, even

though we have fallen from time to time engaging in that. Our church does not have a pure history of being untainted from that sin of racism.

Jesus has a dream in mind for us in today's parable that we just heard. This is the theme of our liturgical series during these fall months of stretching beyond the familiar. And today the primary focus will be on crossing the racial barriers. Last Sunday when I was here I mentioned that my first wave or movements of stretching beyond the familiar was growing up in Bardstown in a heavily Catholic area. When I was ordained some years later, I was sent down into the southern missions of Kentucky, which was one-half of one percent Catholic – 1 out of every 200 – so it called for a readjustment on my part. I had been in charge before this with all of my Catholics, but when I went down there I was definitely in the minority, and I had to watch and be careful. But it turned out beautifully I mentioned last week. I had to embrace diverse faiths that I was not all that familiar with at the time. It turned out to be a wonderful experience. So that's my first wave or movement in the area of stretching beyond the familiar.

My second movement or wave, I call it, was from 1982 until 2002, a period of 20 years, when I began in a more serious way to cross the racial divide. Once again, it was involved with my growing up in Bardstown, where like many of you experienced in your own places, a racially segregated place – both in the restaurants and the schools, in the movies, and to a great extent in the church. My journey during these years brought me to two Black parishes; the first from early 80's to mid-80's was in St. Benedict. Many of you may have been familiar with that long ago in the West End of Louisville. I was there. It was 98% Black, and 2% still remaining of the Caucasians. Twenty years ago I was appointed pastor of St. Monica Church in Bardstown, predominantly a Black church, historically Black, although today and many years before has a nice smattering, a healthy mix of Caucasians. With these new developments in my life, I had to readjust, first of all my thinking. I had to have, we like to say in Lent, a metanoia. I had to have a conversion. Sometimes people start with heart, but the conversion – the metanoia – etymologically from the Greek – means the conversion up here in the head. Attitude. How can you have a conversion of heart when you haven't changed what's going on upstairs? So I had to have that metanoia, a new way of seeing things. I had to learn about the distinction between prejudice and racism. Prejudice, we know, usually springing from fear or ignorance, or sometimes just plain meanness. And racism, which has more to do with power and who's in charge and who thinks they are superior and who is going to dominate, oftentimes has the systemic element in it that we don't always even recognize.

I learned not to see color blind as a positive! Many of the people that told me they were color blind really weren't. Rather I had to learn to see and to acknowledge the beauty of differences and to notice the difference and the color and the cultures to experience what it's like to be the only one in a group – whether that group is Black or White. That was a new experience to learn to see that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream of the beloved community and Malcolm X's dream of a different kind were not so much in opposition as they were complementary. Reading the autobiography of Malcolm X was one of the high points of my life, and one of the conversion experiences of my life. A beautiful autobiography.

The tragic ending of both of those lives – both at the age of 39, and only three years apart – deprived of our world of what might have been. They only met once for one minute. Malcolm, I think, is particularly interesting. He had his first conversion from the Baptist faith to the Nation of Islam, the American form, but what was most important in the last eleven months of his life, the last eleven months when he made his pilgrimage to Mecca and visited a number of African nations, did he have a true conversion so it gave him a new way of understanding the human family and of understanding sin. He changed his focus in those months from civil rights, as important as that is, to human rights. And he saw the possibility of all people – not just Blacks or whatever color – all citizens becoming citizens of our one world. Beautiful conversion and impressive.

During this same period, my second movement or wave had to do with my involvement with CLOUT, which Epiphany is quite familiar with, from 1993 when it was started until 2002. During those years I was co-president for quite a few of those. It was a very unusual and beautiful experience of bringing people of various faiths, mostly Catholic and Protestant, and colors, that was especially beautiful, and cultures, and working together for a single goal. We were very successful in doing that and our action that we would do once or twice a year sometimes that arose, not from leadership, but from the grassroots expressing what their needs were and what they wanted to deal with. It was beautiful. This was coupled at the same time with my being pastor at St. Timothy Church in southwest Jefferson County, and at the time, spending 25 hours a week at Central State Hospital as chaplain just a stone's throw from here. That's an experience of ten years – 85 to 95 – that I'll be eternally grateful for because it, once again, allowed me to expand and stretch my experience with the unfamiliar.

My final wave or movement was my third wave I'm calling it, and this is what helped me to become more immersed in the Hispanic and Latino community, beginning with my sabbatical back in 2002 where I went and lived with a family in

Guatemala, western Guatemala, for eight weeks, none of whom spoke a word of English. A grandmother age 65, daughter age 40, and granddaughter age 7 – spoiled brat she was – but wonderful experience. The only words they understood or knew in English was the one we're all familiar with and that is the one from the Terminator – hasta la vista...you know the rest. The other word was "lunch." When I would leave for five hours of class each morning at a quarter of eight, Lydia, the grandmother, would ask "lunch?" And I would say, "No Lydia. I'm not going to be back for lunch today." I had the temptation, as I did from time to time, to just go to Domino's and to McDonald's, like any good Yankee, and enjoy the food. I just got tired of all the rice and beans and the tacos, etc. So those were the two words. This was a beautiful experience, and this experience back in '02 enabled me upon return to the Archdiocese and going to Casey County, way down there, to gather the Hispanic community in that county. Most they were from Chiapas, the most southern and the poorest state in Mexico, and also a group many of whom were from Guatemala. I would celebrate the liturgy for them once a month in Spanish, and we would have lots of baptism, as you might expect. Simply done.

So these are my experiences in dealing with how to cross that barrier. I am thankful to God for them, and I hope that I have dealt with them in the best way I knew how. Each of us has our own experience, and each of us knows what we have done or what we haven't done in stretching beyond the familiar, especially today in the area of racism and all of that. So we celebrate that today and hope that we can all do better. And we're going to ask for God's help today by being here to spur us on into bringing about God's reign. Not just in the hereafter, as we well know, but as we progress through this life so that we can become and continue to be God's people and in God's reign.