

The Banquet of Heaven and Hell

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IT MAY seem a bit odd for the Church to present to us, as we are still in the early part of the Lenten fast and abstinence, the image of a great banquet. Yet on the Saturday before the third Sunday of Lent, we are given for our consideration the Gospel of the Prodigal Son. This parable has such depth and complexity that one could ponder it during all of Lent and still not plumb its riches. But for now, I want to look at just one aspect of it – the great banquet the father sets up for his long-lost son.

The Latin word for banquet is *convivium* – from which we get our English notion of conviviality, which is finding joy in the company of others, usually with festive food and drink. The image of a convivium is a powerful and recurrent one in scripture. We have only to think of references to the great wedding feast of the Lamb, and Christ's own parables of wedding feasts. We recall his own contribution of an unseemly quantity of excellent wine at the wedding feast of Cana. We might recall too how he was criticized by the scribes and Pharisees for his conviviality, for banqueting with publicans and sinners. I suspect we rarely picture our Saviour as having a good time in the company of others -- enjoying life, friendship, festive food and drink. But clearly his conviviality was apparent enough to cause scandal to the scrupulous observers who criticized him for not being sober and self-denying as John the Baptist had been. (Of course, our Lord points out wryly that these critics didn't really have much use for John the Baptist either.)

We see the image of the convivium again in reference to the holy Eucharist -- *O sacrum convivium*: "O sacred Banquet, in which Christ is received, the memory of his Passion recalled, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory given to us."

Thus we should not be surprised to find, in the parable where Christ wishes to show us the prodigal and unstinting love of his Father toward his wandering and faithless sons and daughters, the image of a great convivium. Note the application of the term prodigal to the father, for it is he who is the true prodigal – that is, prodigious and uncalculating in his endless and un-

conditional love for his wasteful son. The sentiment of the elder son should not be lost on us: why waste our fatted calf on this wastrel brother? And isn't there a part of us that resonates to the elder brother's resentment and rancor at the sound of merriment for this returned and most undeserving bum of a brother? "And he was angry, and would not go in."

Here is the very heart of the parable. We all grasp (though rarely to the depth the parable calls us) the fathomless and rapturous love of the father for the returning son. But we miss the problem that afflicts the elder son – which is our problem. It is this: for years we, like the elder son, have lived in the presence of a father whose love has no bounds, whose conviviality extends even to those who have spurned and abandoned him, whose love – on the return of the prodigal son – can only express itself in a superfluity of joy, celebration and merriment, loading the prodigal with riches and honours. The behaviour of this father is not a momentary flash of relief or joy, but the profound expression of his deepest and permanent character – of a fathomless love and joy that seeks only to welcome and celebrate the lost and wandering soul whose return he has been longing for and awaiting: "...but when [the son] was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and fell on his neck, and kissed him." Imagine having a father such as this!

And yet we do have such a Father; though we have so often and for so long turned away from him, that we forget with what love he longs to embrace and welcome us home to himself. Are we not very much more like the elder son, knowing the father, yet not ever really learning his love and compassion? Have not you and I lived for years in God's house yet never plumbed the depth of a love that welcomes and embraces the repulsive and undeserving? How can the elder brother have lived with such a father and not learned about *convivium* – the joy that is proper to the return of the prodigal to his father's house, to the very heart and center of all conviviality? The salutary warning for us in the example of the elder son is this: unless and until we let our hearts become like that of our father – boundless in love – the very conviviality and joy of his house (heaven) will be hell for us, a source of resentment and hatred. God freely and always holds out to us the unmerited gift of infinite joy and life with him, endless presence at his convivium; yet unless in this life (and in this Lent) we learn to have hearts like his, loving sinners even before they repent, then even God's love will seem repellent to us, and his convivium – his heavenly banquet and joyful feast – will be our hell. Though heartily welcomed, we, like the elder son, will be angry and not go in. And there is no other banquet, no other convivium apart from this.

May our prodigal and loving God, through our Lenten observance, remold and fashion our hearts like unto his – that having grown prodigious in love we may, with free and happy hearts, be prepared to enter into the great convivium that is the very life of the holy and blessed Trinity and of all the souls in heaven. §