

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Isaiah 25:6-10a / Matthew 22:1-14)
15.10.2017
Do not judge!

We all have heard Jesus' words. Should we not be scandalised and shocked? Or are we so used to hear these texts that we do not really pay attention to them?

Jesus declared that "everyone, bad and good alike" had to be invited to the wedding feast.

"Everyone, bad and good alike". Obviously we do not have any problem with the fact that everyone is invited as long as "everyone" does not include the bad ones! Yet Jesus is quite clear "bad and good alike" are not only invited but they are given access to the wedding hall.

What does that mean for us today? As Churches, how do we deal with Jesus' statement? Do we welcome "everyone, bad and good alike"? Are they all invited to the celebrations of our Christian communities? Do the bad ones feel and know that they are invited and welcomed?

Maybe there are other questions to be asked: who are the bad ones of our 21st century Northern Ireland? Who are those whom we consider unworthy of being part of our communities? Who are those who do not fit the requirements for coming and celebrating with us?

Here we reach the deepest lesson of our Gospel reading: it is not up to us to decide who is worthy or invited. It is not our business to say who is good or bad. Our mission is to bring all men and women to Christ, to the place where they can see themselves for who they truly are: beloved children of God in need of his healing and restoring grace. There and then the Lord who knows us through and through will judge us with mercy and justice.

That is what is described in our parable. Like the servants of the king, we are sent into the world in order to invite all men and women, bad and good alike, to the wedding feast.

It seems to me that we fail in our mission because we forget that we are only servants, we are not wedding planners, we are not in charge of the guest list. We are often tempted to choose those we want to be present at the wedding and so we create mental barriers, good reasons, rules and regulations which keep those we do not like, those who are different, outside the secure perimeter of our communities.

It is clear that sometimes we must operate difficult discernments, that there are boundaries which we cannot cross without contradicting our values and going against our conscience; there is no doubt that rules and regulations are helpful to organise the life of our communities.

Yet we have to be very humble and acknowledge that we know very little about others, that the little we know is often marred by bias, fears and emotions. This parable is a vivid illustration of Jesus' warning: "Do not judge" (Mt 7:1). St James' question is addressed to us: "Who are you to judge?" (4:12)

There is a great dose of pride in thinking that we are able to see and discern who is worthy of God's grace. Moreover there is a greater dose of pride in believing that our communities can be made up of only good and clean people. Far too easily we forget that the line which separates good from bad runs through our hearts, that none of us is so good that he

or she can stand on a high moral ground and judge others. God has been patient and merciful with each one of us in the past, why would he not act in the same way today with those whom we regard as bad?

The pride I just mentioned is well described by a French writer who once compared Churches to railway companies. According to him, in order to send impeccably clean trains to God, Churches are ready to send him empty trains! (cf. Jean Grosjean, *Ironie...*, p. 138) In our parable we are clearly told that “the wedding hall was filled with guests”. The mistake here is about the nature of the Church in general and of our communities in particular.

They are not supposed to exist for those who are in good health but for those who are sick (cf. Mk 2:17), they are called to embrace all in love.

There is another aspect which is important to note: the image of the servants leaving the house of the king and running to the crossroads, alleyways, dead-ends and motorways speaks to us about what we should do. The point is that it is not enough not to prevent anybody from joining our holy huddles, we are supposed to go out and actively shine like stars in the world (cf. Phil 2:15) so that, bad and good alike, may see where the light they long for is to be found.

The parable of the wheat and the weed (Mt 13:24-30) should help us to understand what Jesus really means: if we try to pick and choose those we think are good and reject those who are bad, we run the risk of discarding some who are good. We have to keep in mind that our criteria are not necessarily God's. Jesus advises us to wait for the harvest and for the master of the harvest to accomplish his work.

We waste a lot of time trying to do something which is not our job, something which we are not equipped to do: namely to judge people. In a way to judge gives us the impression that we are in control and that we are safe and secure. The reality is that it makes our communities very small and self-righteous, unattractive and irrelevant.

If we want to be alive and life-giving we need to learn to accomplish our mission to bring Christ to all men and women with humility and mercy, and to put our trust in God who alone is able to test all minds and to search and understand all hearts (cf. Jr 17:10).