

Third Sunday of Advent – Excuses

*Delivered by Rev. Fr. Ghevond Ajamian
St. Sarkis Armenian Church. Carrollton, TX
December 11, 2016
Gospel Reading: Luke 14:12-24*

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In today's Gospel reading, we hear Christ telling a parable about a banquet prepared by a man for his three friends. When the time came for dinner, he sent out his servant to call and collect his invitees, but they canceled with excuses. One said he bought a field and had to check it, another said he bought five yoke of oxen and had to examine them and the third said he had just married and could not attend. Upset, the man ordered his servants to go to the streets and lanes and roads and hedges and collect everyone and bring them to the feast. He then gives a warning, "None of those men who were invited shall taste of my banquet" (Luke 14:24).

To fully comprehend this parable, we need to understand ancient Middle Eastern mentality and customs. When someone was going to have a banquet, invitations would be sent out weeks or months in advance, informing people of the date, but without noting the hour or time of day. When everything was ready on the day of the banquet, servants would be sent out to gather the invitees. To refuse the invitation at the last minute, after already accepting the invite, was a great insult – similar to accepting a wedding invitation today and then not showing up to the wedding reception.

With all of Christ's parables, there is great symbolism in this parable. The man represents God. In the ancient world, there was a tradition among the Jews that when the Messiah came, he would prepare a great feast and all the Jews would partake in it. In today's parable, the original invitees represented the Jewish people who originally said they would participate in the feast, but then, at the last moment, refused – just as they did when Christ came.

Those who were called to replace the original invitees were from the streets and the lanes, the lame, blind and deaf, they represent the tax collectors and sinners; those who have been injured by the sins of this world. Those collected from the roads and hedges are the Gentiles – all of us. This parable is a threat to the Jews and a promise to the Gentiles, but there are also truths which are permanent today as they were 2,000 years ago – why people do not partake in this banquet prepared by God.

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The first invitee refused because he had just bought a field, which represents work. People say they are tired or busy. The second refused to go to the banquet because he bought five yoke of oxen, which represent possessions, things which replace God in our lives. The third refused the invitation because he had just married, which represents good things, like family and home – things we think are more important than God.

These are the three main reasons why people don't come to church or make time in their lives to worship God: work, things and family. Yet, there are two main things we must learn from today's parable.

First, we are all invited to this feast with Jesus Christ. No matter whom we are or what we've done in our lives, He wants us and has invited us. He calls us by name and has a seat with our name tag on it, with our favorite meal. The Divine Liturgy, which we celebrate every Sunday, is the precursor of the final banquet at Christ's Second Coming and we are all invited to the Divine Liturgy.

Second, there are always excuses not to come to church and worship. We make up excuses and hear them, just like the three excuses in the parable: work, possessions and family. These are only some of the excuses people make, but there are many more:

- *People gossip*
- *People aren't nice*
- *I don't have a position or responsibility*
- *I don't believe in organized religion*
- *I don't like the priest*

For those who are of this opinion, there is only one thing I can say: we do not go to church or partake in this banquet for any reason other than out of our love for God and to thank Him for all the blessings He has given us. We do not and must not come to church for any other reason other than this – not for socializing, not for gossiping, not for the priest – only for God.

For if anyone uses excuses not to come to church and not worship the all-holy Trinity and rejects the invitation which God has sent all of us, then that person must remember the warning which Christ says, "None of those men who were invited shall taste of my banquet" (Luke 14:24).

Amen.