

“Preparing for the Banquet with the King”
Homily for the Annual Blue Mass, 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year “A”

Introduction

It is my pleasure to welcome you all here today for this first annual Blue Mass held at our Cathedral. The relatively recent custom of this “Blue Mass” for first responders is typically held on the Sunday closest to September 11th, “9/11,” of course, being a very painful and tragic reminder of how utterly important our fire and police services are to us, and how truly indebted we are to them. Here locally in San Francisco we have recently had another sad reminder of all that our first responders risk for our protection: the tragic death of Jason Cortez, a young father and firefighter who fell from the top of a building during a training exercise.

Be Prepared

The fact that Jason was training when the accident happened tells us something that is easy for us civilians to overlook: first responders are constantly training, they are always preparing themselves for their duty. This is a valuable lesson for what the readings from the Bible are teaching us in today’s Mass.

The king prepares a wedding banquet for his son. He sends an invitation to the guests, but they ignore it. This apparently was their RSVP, because he sends a second invitation when the party is ready. But they are not prepared to receive it, for they are too busy going about their everyday affairs and making an income. The ones who are prepared and are admitted are those whom you would least expect. Indeed, when the king tells his servants to go into the main roads, what this means is that they had to continue walking on the road beyond the confines of the city and go out into the countryside to try to find people to bring into the wedding feast. These are the ones who were receptive, who in their hearts were prepared to receive the king’s invitation. The guests who got the RSVP, on the other hand, were not prepared even after two tries.

A helpful way to approach this parable is to consider these two categories of invited guests and apply them ourselves. Which category do we fit into? But there is another group of people in this parable that we can compare ourselves to: the servants. The servants are the ones who go out looking for guests to bring in to the king’s feast. This idea of a great banquet, which we also heard about in our first reading from the prophet Isaiah where he describes a lavish, sumptuous banquet, is a biblical image of the life of heaven, that sense of communion and fellowship and fullness of life. The servants are the ones who go out and look for people to bring into this feast, and, as it turns out, at great risk to themselves, even to their very lives.

Clearly the lesson here is that as members of the Body of Christ, the Church, we are called to go out and bring those who are far away from God into His Kingdom. We are the servants of the King, and we should have no regard for our own comfort or convenience in serving Him. But let's not confine our idea of what this means to having some sort of job in the Church, even as a volunteer: teaching catechism, planning liturgies, leading meetings of different parish groups, and so forth. All of those are certainly important, and we are thankful to those who give of their time and talent to this necessary ministries. But there is more to it than that.

In the Line of Duty

We are servants of God when we do well the duties that correspond to our state in life. This means first of all family life, fulfilling lovingly and dutifully our role in the family, whether as husbands or wives or parents or children. But it also means the work that we do, which is a major part of how we grow into being the person God created us to be.

When we speak about God's creation and the work that we do, our first responders have a special role to play, for they are the only wall of protection between people in our communities and all that would do them harm. The harm that is inflicted is what brings chaos into the world. This is exactly the state of things before creation. What does the Bible tell us about God's work of creation? God created the universe by creating order out of chaos. Order is reflective of God, chaos – that is, disorder – is the work of the evil one. The devil wants disorder because that way he can tear us down. Our first responders are the ones who help preserve order in society, and so contribute to making this world look more like the Kingdom of God. Those in law enforcement most especially represent the forces of order, for they are the ones who protect innocent citizens from being harmed by other people, people who would perpetrate acts of violence on others.

This is why attacks on law enforcement are so insidious. Yes, there are bad actors, as every profession has its bad actors. Yes, in some departments the problems are systemic, and reform is needed. But San Francisco has been in the forefront of effective police reform. Right now, right at this time, when we need the police the most, they need our support the most. In all professions, ongoing honest assessments need to be conducted in order to identify where reform is needed, but this is no time to retreat from support for our local police.

The work of police officers, firefighters, sheriffs, and all other first responders, when done dutifully and well, is the work of a servant of the King, the One Who is King of the whole universe. And they do so just like the servants in the parable in today's Gospel reading: at great risk to their own lives. Every day.

We are with you today, happy to honor you, as an inadequate expression of our gratitude to you for all that you do for our city and her citizens.

This is how we send in our RSVP to God: fulfilling the duties of our state in life in a way that contributes to building up order in our lives and in our communities, committed to the common good with a selfless and cheerful spirit of generosity. And that state in life isn't necessarily those who are Church workers. For some, yes, but not for most. There may be some surprises with who gets admitted to that lavish, sumptuous banquet that is the life of God's Kingdom, as we hear about in today's Gospel. But it is no surprise that God gives each of us an opportunity to send in our RSVP.

Conclusion

Let us, then, make sure we are prepared, let us take full advantage of the times and opportunities God gives us in this life even in carrying out our everyday routines, to be ready to enter that wedding feast. If we do so, we will get a taste of the life of heaven already here in this world.