



THE BANQUET AT THE END OF TIME

A Pastoral Letter for the Teulu Asaph from the bishop: October 2021

One of my very favourite poems is by George Herbert, the seventeenth century Anglican theologian and minister. Entitled “Love (III)”, it is for me an interpretation of the very heart of the Gospel – the Good News that we as Christians are called upon to proclaim.

Jesus himself spoke about the Kingdom of God as a banquet, a great party, which God would hold at the end of this world, and which would inaugurate the next. In Herbert’s poem, Love (God himself) invites us to this heavenly feast.

However, as set out in Scripture, there is a problem, what theologians name our inherent “sinfulness”. In other words, a flaw at the heart of our being makes every single one of us less than perfect, unqualified for heaven. The subject of

the poem – the “I” – knows the problem: he has marred the divine image in his life and he is “guilty of dust and sin”, so that shame (what we might call repentance) will not let him enter the feast.

Yet, where the Bible identifies the problem, the Bible also reveals a solution: “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.” (*John 3.16*). In the poem, Love takes on the sin and shame of the world: “Who bore the blame?” It is a reference to God’s sacrifice of himself in Jesus upon the cross, where God takes on himself all the pain, fault and cost of human failure (*Colossians 2.13,14*), and pays the price of salvation, the price of entry into the feast. To pray this poem, and make it our own, is to be a Christian.

The Church’s central purpose is to live into this promise, and to invite others to live into it as well. God longs for us to attend an eternal feast that none of us are qualified to enter, but by his love and grace, by his sacrifice, the way is made open, if we will but accept that the price is paid. It is this exchange which is at the heart of the Gospel, the good news of salvation: it is what salvation means, and it is reflected throughout the New Testament as a description of God’s action in Jesus. “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (*1 John 4.10*) “If God is for us, who can be against us? (*Romans 8.31*). What greater invitation could there be?

As we come out of lockdown, and enter again into our mission, which is the purpose for which God sends us into the world, let us remember that the proclamation of reconciliation through the Cross is the heart of everything we believe and do. This is the Gospel of the Lord, and throwing the doors of our hearts wide open to Jesus is the one action, above all else, to which we are called.

LOVE bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.

But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lack’d anything.

‘A guest,’ I answer’d, ‘worthy to be here:’
Love said, ‘You shall be he.’

‘I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
I cannot look on Thee.’

Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
‘Who made the eyes but I?’

‘Truth, Lord; but I have marr’d them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.’

‘And know you not,’ says Love, ‘Who bore the blame?’
‘My dear, then I will serve.’

‘You must sit down,’ says Love, ‘and taste my meat.’
So I did sit and eat.

