

**Mark 8:34-9:1 / Matthew 22:1-14**

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

Glory to Jesus Christ!

This morning we heard two Gospel readings – one about a wedding banquet and the other about the Cross of Christ – one about the Kingdom of God and the other about the way to the Kingdom.

In the Lord's teaching, the Kingdom of Heaven is likened to numerous things: a vineyard, a dragnet, a mustard seed, a bridal chamber, a pearl of great price, and many other such things, but perhaps no image of the Kingdom of Heaven is more perfect than that of a wedding feast. For the wedding feast is a joyful celebration of a loving union – a loving union between the soul and Christ, between man and God.

Yet we mustn't forget that though salvation is likened to a wedding feast, we are not saved through a banquet. Rather we are saved through a cross – through the Cross of Jesus Christ. For it is through the Cross, that Christ has reconciled man with God, overturning the sin of Adam, overthrowing the tyranny of the devil, and releasing man from captivity to corruption and death.

However, the Cross of Christ – though it be as we sing in our hymnology: the gate of paradise, the protection of the faithful, the might of the Church, the enemy of demons, the glory of the martyrs, and the haven of salvation – though it be as St. Paul says: the wisdom and power of God for those who are being saved – for us today, the Cross comes foremost as an invitation – an invitation to share in Christ's victory over sin, the devil, and death, and thereby dine with God in His heavenly kingdom.

The Lord says, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me." Often times when we think about these words we concentrate on three things. What does it mean to deny oneself? What does it mean to take up one's cross? And what does it mean to follow Christ? And often times we become overwhelmed by the sheer difficulty of putting these things into practice. For we know all too well how difficult it is to deny oneself, take up one's cross, and follow Christ.

However, if we concentrate only on these three things, we are missing an important piece of the puzzle. Let us pay attention to exactly what the Lord says. He says very clearly: "Whoever desires to come after Me... let him do such and such..." "Whoever desires to come after Me..." In other words, do these things only if you desire to come after Me.

Often times in our Christian life, we know not only what we should do but we also know that we don't want to do it. We know that we should put an immediate and once-and-for-all stop to the sins we so routinely commit, we know we should curb our passions and deny the base desires of our hearts. We know that we should live a more pious and

godly life, saying our morning and evening prayers, attending more church services, observing more closely the fasting disciplines, reading our Bible, attending to the needs of others, giving alms to the poor, etc., yet we don't want to do it.

And why don't we want to do it? Well perhaps it is because these things require some effort on our part, they require spiritual sweat, they require us to change our ways and change is difficult work.

Of perhaps our problem is not laziness, perhaps our problem has more to do with the fact that we really don't desire heavenly things – that is we don't deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Christ, because we just aren't interested in learning and keeping His ways, we aren't interested in virtue and we aren't interested in the spiritual joys of heaven.

And in this way, we become like the men in today's Gospel who were invited to the wedding banquet but asked the Master to hold them excused because they had other things on their minds and in their hearts – things of this world, things subject to corruption, things which we cannot take with us beyond the grave.

Brothers and sisters, the time has come for us to ask ourselves some very serious questions. 1) Do I desire to follow after Christ? and 2) What am I doing or not doing to deny myself, take up my cross, and follow Him?

Or phrased another way: Do I want to be a guest at the heavenly wedding banquet? And if so what am I doing to prepare a wedding garment for myself?

Today the Cross of Christ is before us. Today we are given an invitation to dine at the Lord's table in the Kingdom of heaven. Today we are told what we must do to get there.

Let us not be earthly minded people who have no desire for heavenly things. Nor let us be lazy or stuck in our ways. But instead let us have a deep desire to be with Christ, and let us have firm resolve to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Him.

Through the Cross, Christ has overcome sin, the devil, and death. Through the Cross, He has made a path for us from death to life, from corruption to incorruption, from earth to heaven. Through the Cross, He has destroyed the handwriting of our sins and reconciled us with God.

The only thing Christ has not done for us and will not do for us, is force us to follow Him. He invites us, but He will not force us.

With His precious blood, Christ has paid our admission to the heavenly banquet. And He has given us the cross as our ticket to the feast. Let us accept the invitation, deny ourselves, take the cross in hand, and follow Him into the wedding banquet of His heavenly kingdom.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.