



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

“The Great Banquet” **Excerpted from** ***Invitation from God***

Fr. Thomas Keating and Marie Louise Lefèvre

Keating: The parables of Jesus are a special kind of literature. They don't give answers, but they open a window onto the Kingdom of God, or more specifically onto the nature of God. They're little revelations of who the Father is, and for Jesus to reveal who the Father is, was I think, his chief preoccupation. But I think more profoundly, Jesus has come to reveal the inmost nature of Ultimate Reality and so he did this one parable that explains this movement of divine love as it enters into human nature. It's the parable of the great banquet. The banquet in itself was an event in which symbolized identification with the people you sat down with. Sitting down to eat a meal with people was identifying with their circumstances and their values and who they were.

The householder goes in and joins the banqueters, not only the poor and the disabled, the oppressed, that would have been understood, but with the very dregs of humanity; that is, sinners. So, that means that the Ultimate Reality has, in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, has actually joined the human family, just where it is with all its weakness, its powerlessness, its capacity for all evil, and its potentiality to become divine through the sheer gratuity of God's grace.

So, this is what the incarnation really means. God has truly become a human being at the most profound level, or at the most remote level of worthiness. So, worthiness or merit is not an issue. The issue is accepting the invitation, or in submitting to being dragged in, if you don't want to go. They could have fought off, I guess, the servants, if they really wanted to. So, this is a window onto God that is incomparable, and a window onto the human condition that changes, could change the whole way that we look at other people, or understand ourselves. So, no matter who you are, you are invited to the banquet of salvation. Which is not just going to green pastures; but is actually participating in the divine life. In other words, God has identified with us in such a way that we are invited to be identified with His values, with His life, the way He lives, with His love; in other words, to be incorporated through Christ into the Trinitarian life in the fullest sense of that term, meaning to enjoy the divine life as God does.

Lefèvre: But Father Thomas, does that also apply to people who are not baptized?

Keating: Yes, I think it does, because this again is a theological development that isn't fully explicit in the Christian tradition as yet, but some outstanding theologians have held this opinion; at

least have come close to it. For instance, Karl Rahner, the outstanding German theologian, believed that nature is graced. That is to say, just being born is an introduction into the spiritual journey; there isn't any other choice!

But it seems to me that, given this parable and other parables in which Jesus takes down all kinds of barriers, social status and what-not, as being contrary to the kingdom of God, that the essential Christian experience is the experience of Abba, that is, of the Ultimate Reality as motherly, loving, nurturing, caring, bending over us, desiring to communicate its life to us in the fullest possible sense.

That's why this third category of people at the banquet are so significant. It means that God wants to save everybody and offer the same goodness and reward without any respect of persons but as a sheer gratuity. So, here is where Lutherans and Catholics can finally agree – they should never have gotten separated anyway! But justification is by grace, it's not by good deeds, it's God's total gratuity, symbolized by the third category at the banquet. You're invited, you don't need any, you don't need to win God's love to earn it, you've already got it. And hence, it's the question of relaxing into the being that you actually are, or according to this diagram, relax into the ground of your being, which is God's expression of himself in our particular uniqueness.