

THE LORD HAS PREPARED A FEAST

Sermon for the 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, 2017

Isaiah 25:6-9

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Isaiah 25:6-9: **<sup>6</sup> On this mountain the LORD of hosts will prepare for all peoples a banquet of rich food, a banquet with aged wines, rich foods full of marrow, and refined, aged wines. <sup>7</sup> On this mountain He will destroy the surface of the shroud that is covering all peoples and the blanket that has been woven over all nations. <sup>8</sup> He will swallow up death for ever. The Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and He will remove the disgrace of His people from the whole earth. For the LORD has spoken. <sup>9</sup> On that day people will say: “Look! This is our God. We have been waiting for Him to save us. This is the LORD, for whom we have been waiting. Let us rejoice and be glad that He has saved us!”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

I'm sure you all know the name *Ernest Hemingway*. Hemingway was an American novelist, short story writer, and journalist. His economical and understated style had a strong influence on 20th-century fiction, while his life of adventure and his public image influenced later generations. Many of his works are considered classics of American literature. In his observations of death and the miserable state of human existence, Ernest Hemingway wrote of a “blackness, ten times black.” He aptly described the darkness of this world. He saw around him death and untold suffering, war, and ongoing pain. Hemingway seemed to find no way out. Perhaps this thinking contributed to his taking his own life. He died as one who could not see through all the doom and gloom of the world, into the glorious future reserved for those who place their hope and trust in Christ. This is what Isaiah is speaking of today. Yes, there is darkness and death in this fallen world, but in Isaiah 25, we read of a victory feast which even now takes place amidst all the darkness. Christ is risen! Darkness is swallowed up by light. Death is swallowed up in victory! Death is what we deserve as the just penalty for our

sin. No human efforts or resources can shelter anyone from this reproach, but by Jesus' resurrection, death has been swallowed up in victory.<sup>1</sup>

Isaiah begins by saying, <sup>6</sup> **On this mountain the LORD of hosts will prepare for all peoples a banquet of rich food, a banquet with aged wines, rich foods full of marrow, and refined, aged wines.**

The **mountain** in our text is Jerusalem, Mount Zion, or simply Zion - terms that apply to the church of God, the gathering of believers. While the banquet Isaiah described is one of the richest the ancient world could imagine. The language emphasises that it is the best. The wine was aged in order to increase its colour and quality. The **rich foods** were the best that the ancient world could provide. It was **full of marrow**, fat and rich. In our day we are taught to avoid fat, but in the ancient world fat was highly desired. The banquet is the banquet of God's grace.

What wonderful blessings God has prepared for His people! The spiritual blessings described here echo throughout the entire Bible. They are dense and heavy with grace and rich with comfort, something we sorely need as we walk through the valley of deep darkness of this sinful world.

The feast is a surprise, and it is not deserved - because, like sheep, we have all gone astray.<sup>2</sup> Each of us is guilty of the idolatrous gluttony Isaiah condemns elsewhere, and guilty of much more. Each of us has said in our heart and by our actions, *"I will choose when to put God first and honour and worship His name. I will be my own authority in life and will relate to my neighbour as best suits me."* We go astray, each one absorbed in his own way. What a tragic picture of human life! People are often so absorbed with themselves, their problems, their joys, and their struggles that they have no time to think about anyone or anything else. Instead of being guests at the LORD's banquet, we deserve only God's curse. Remember back in the Garden of Eden God had told our first parents, *"You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die,"* (Gen. 3:3). We know what happened, and now, we die. That is our curse.

Now, Isaiah says that the LORD **will destroy the surface of the shroud that is covering all peoples and the blanket that has been woven over all nations.** <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:54

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 53:6

**He will swallow up death for ever. The Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and He will remove the disgrace of His people from the whole earth.**

Note that the Lord acts in these verses. After preparing a **banquet**, He “**destroy(s)... the shroud,**” “**swallow(s) up death,**” “**wipe(s) away tears,**” and “**remove(s) the disgrace.**” No human action occurs. You receive what God graciously provides, and His love and forgiveness come unexpectedly, as surprising as a wolf lying down with a lamb,<sup>3</sup> or as startling as Jesus’ empty grave was to the women.<sup>4</sup> So too, when you are spiritually starving and not deserving of even the smallest crumb, God prepares a table before you in the presence of your final enemy, death. Remember the words of Psalm 23 from before, <sup>4</sup> *Even though I walk through the valley of deep darkness, I shall fear no evil. For You are with me. Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.* <sup>5</sup> **You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows,** (Psalm 23:5). Our salvation is entirely the action of our God.

The words “**shroud**” and “**blanket**” here seem most naturally to be taken from the practice of wearing a veil when mourning the death of a loved one or wearing a covering when confronted by great misfortune and calamity. Death is the scourge of every society and every culture. Death’s icy grasp shakes every culture. When it comes to a family, the survivors often cover themselves with clothes of mourning. It used to be that everyone would wear black to a funeral. The individual customs vary among all the cultures of the world, but the pervasive heartache and sorrow of death is universal. In our contemporary world where pictures carry distressing images across language and cultural barriers, none is more powerful than a picture of a survivor mourning a tragic death. But the covenant-God of Israel, the LORD, has an answer to death. “**He will swallow up death for ever.**” When one swallows something, it disappears and ceases to exist. Human effort cannot remove death. Medicine may prolong life and remove some of life’s hurts and aches, but it cannot inoculate against death or radiate death until it disappears. ***Only God can swallow up death.*** The Greek and Latin name for an ancient coffin is “sarcophagus.” Sarcophagus literally means “flesh eater.” God

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 11:6

<sup>4</sup> Mark 16:8

devours the “sarcophagus,” or pictured another way, God unwraps the funeral cloth from Christ and from us,<sup>5</sup> and uses it as the tablecloth for His feast.

Human love, as noble as it may be, cannot conquer death. It cannot give us the hope of seeing a loved one again. The only bridge between the land of the living and the land of the dead is Christ, and God’s love is what compelled the Son to take on human flesh and die, that death itself might be consumed.

God also wipes **away tears from all faces**. Death brings all sorts of pain and anguish. One is that of having to say farewell to a loved one. Human tears flow from hearts broken and aching. Children shed tears when they hurt. Adults shed tears in the face of great tragedy. Tears are often the only response humans can muster in the face of circumstances they cannot change. Death, of course, is one such difficulty, but we do encounter others. What comfort God offers to His people! He will wipe the tears from our faces. What a remarkable promise, and what a beautiful picture of the compassion of the Lord of the covenant! God Himself pauses to comfort His people and tenderly wipe away their tears.

The Apostle Paul echoes such language in his great resurrection chapter, 1 Corinthians 15. There he says, “*Death has been swallowed up in victory*,” (1 Corinthians 15:54). The apostle John echoes another in the last book of the Bible, “*He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away*,” (Revelation 21:4). Jesus Himself demonstrated the truth of these promises when He told the mother of the young man of Nain to dry her eyes and then brought her only son back to life. Tears were removed, and death was swallowed up. Of course, the Lord’s own resurrection demonstrated His absolute power over death. For all people of all time, Jesus Christ has arisen and overcome and defeated death once and for all. Only the Lord Almighty could accomplish such a feat. He came into this world to die for your sins. His eating of death has taken away the sting of death for all of us. One day, we will have every tear wiped away. One day, there will be no more farewells. Being baptised into Christ’s death, we are baptised into His resurrection.<sup>6</sup> We have the hope of a joyful reunion in heaven, a banquet prepared for us, yet now we eat too.

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<sup>5</sup> John 11:44

<sup>6</sup> Romans 6:3

The banquet is prepared for us. It is a **banquet of rich food, a banquet with aged wines, rich foods full of marrow, and refined, aged wines**. It is the feast of the new kingdom, brought about by Christ's death and resurrection. We are brought in from east and west, north and south, to recline with Him at His table. He is the host - literally too. He serves the choicest of food, His very body and blood in His Supper. Even amid the darkness of this world, we feast. Easter brings light and hope. This meal nourishes us now and also points us to the future, when the whole "communion of saints" will come to be seated at the table of the Lord, and He will dine with us anew. When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, He said to His disciples, *"I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom,"* (Matt. 26:29). The Lord's Supper points our attention both to the past and to the future. We look back to Golgotha, and we look forward to heaven. The liturgy reminds us that *"our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night when He was betrayed, took bread..."* And even as we do this in remembrance of Him, He promises us the same thing, *"I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."* In the Lord's Prayer, we say to our Father in heaven, *"Thy kingdom come."* Whether we realise it or not, we are praying for the day when Christ will drink of the fruit of the vine with us in a new way. And He certainly hears our prayer. A preliminary answer to the Second Petition is given to us as we partake of the Lord's Supper. Jesus established His Father's kingdom by His death on the cross. Jesus promised, *"I am with you always"* (28:20). So He comes to you, and the kingdom of His Father comes to you, as He feeds you with His body and gives you His blood to drink for the forgiveness of your sins. The Lord's Supper is a little foretaste of heaven that we enjoy already here on earth.

Dear friends, you need this feast. This world is like a cellar. It is dark and murky, rank with foulness. It is inhabited by creatures of sin's night. But into this place, the light of Christ has come. The darkness is pushed back. Here in bread and wine, in water and the Word, is your saving God.

God's banquet of victory proclaims that death has been swallowed up by Christ's life. The final enemy is defeated, and will be no more. Here today is the treasure of God's feast for you. Christ is risen! He comes to give Himself to you that you might also live with Him forever. That is why we sing **This is the LORD, for whom we have been waiting. Let us rejoice and be glad that He has saved us!** Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

#### PRAYER FOR THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Lord God, You are eternally faithful and true to Your Word. You have kept every one of Your great and precious promises. Today we again come before Your throne of grace in gratitude for all Your goodness, in particular, for the gift of Jesus Christ Your Son, and for all the rich blessings we have received in Him. We thank You that He has accomplished our rebirth and salvation when it was humanly-speaking impossible. We thank You that in His life and being we see Your glory, that in the truth, goodness, and love He showed we see Your mercy and love, that in His obedience even to death on a cross we have forgiveness of sins, that in His resurrection from the grave we have the assurance of our own resurrection to life everlasting, and that in His ascension to heaven we have in Him One who brings before You all our needs.

Renew us day by day by Your Holy Spirit, that we may firmly believe in Jesus, love and serve Him, and show His saving power to others in all we think, do, or say. Free us from all love of earthly values, and strengthen our hope in Your promises. Make us more trusting in your mighty power and grace. Deepen our sympathy and love for all people, and remove every trace of selfishness. Keep us firm in Your truth to the end of our days. Enable us all to build one another up in common mind and purpose.

Heavenly Father, guard Your Church from false and disloyal preachers. Keep it obedient and faithful to all the teachings of Your Word. Enable us to acknowledge the work of Your Spirit through the Gospel wherever it is. Refresh us by Your Spirit, that we may remain in living fellowship with Jesus Christ, proclaim Your truth with living power, and minister to the needs of people around us with living compassion.

Give peace and harmony to the nations of the earth. Enable people everywhere to live without fear or want, and free them from all oppression, injustice and cruelty. Influence all in our land to live in uprightness, and overthrow all evil. Open people's eyes to the evil of same-sex marriage. Help those who set their minds on earthly pleasure and material prosperity to see that there is no lasting value in them. Protect us from spiritual decay, and strengthen those who warn us of moral danger. Save us from every danger within and without, and help us to live under Your continued favour and blessing.

Live in our homes, O Lord, and be the head of our families. Prove Yourself a helper in every time of need. Bless the weary, the sick, the troubled, and the sorrowful, that they may look to You as the unfailing source of all healing and hope. Continue to watch over and bless the members of this congregation who cannot be with us today due to illness, or old age, or any other ailment. Remind them that You are with them wherever they are.

Please give us favourable weather, so that our farmers can continue their task of feeding the world. Thank You for the recent rain You have given.

All these things, and whatever else we should ask for, we bring before You in the name of Your only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who, together with You and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

### **19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

Isaiah 25:6-9

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Philippians 4:4-13

<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always! I shall say it again: Rejoice! <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be evident to all people! The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> Do not worry about anything, but in everything make your requests known to God by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving! <sup>7</sup> The peace of God, which is beyond all understanding, will also guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

<sup>8</sup> Finally, my fellow-Christians, keep your minds on all things that are true, all things that are noble, all things that are right, all things that are pure, all things that are lovely, all things that are appealing, and anything that is excellent and praiseworthy! <sup>9</sup> Continue to put into practice what you have learned, received, and heard from me, and what you have seen in me! The God

of peace will also be with you.

<sup>10</sup> I am very glad in the Lord that now again you have revived your concern for me. You have been concerned, but have not had an opportunity to show it. <sup>11</sup> I am not saying that I need anything. For I have learned to be content in whatever situation I am in. <sup>12</sup> I know how to be in need, and I know how to have plenty. In every way and in everything I have learnt the secret both of being fully satisfied and of being hungry, both of having plenty and of having too little. <sup>13</sup> I can do everything through Him who strengthens me.

Matthew 22:1-14

<sup>1</sup> Again Jesus used parables in speaking to them. He said: <sup>2</sup> “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding for his son. <sup>3</sup> He sent his servants to call those who had been invited to the wedding, but they refused to come. <sup>4</sup> Then he sent other servants and said to them, ‘Tell the people who have been invited, “Look here! I have prepared my dinner. My bulls and fattened calves have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding!’”

<sup>5</sup> “However, they paid no attention and went away, one to his farm, another to his business; <sup>6</sup> and the rest

seized his servants, mistreated them, and killed them. <sup>7</sup> The king became angry. He sent out his armies, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.

<sup>8</sup> “Then he told his servants: ‘The wedding is ready, but the people who have been invited have not deserved to come. <sup>9</sup> Therefore go where the highways leave the city, and invite everyone you find to the wedding!’

<sup>10</sup> “Those servants went out on the highways and brought in all the people whom they found, both bad and good. Then the wedding hall was filled with guests.

<sup>11</sup> “When the king came in to observe the guests, he saw a man there who was not wearing a wedding garment. <sup>12</sup> He asked him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ The man could not say a thing. <sup>13</sup> Then the king told the servants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him out into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth!’

<sup>14</sup> “For many are invited, but few are chosen.”