

## The Rehearsal Dinner Maundy Thursday - April 1, 2010

This beautiful icon hangs in my office. It's called "Christ the Bridegroom." In the Orthodox Church, the time from Palm Sunday through Wednesday morning of Holy Week observes the "Bridegroom Liturgies;" this icon remains in the church through Maundy Thursday. It's startling: when we Christ as the heavenly Bridegroom, we probably think of the end times, when all spot and blemish is removed from the Church and from all of the faithful; when the risen and exalted Savior welcomes his Bride, the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven like a bride adorned for her husband; when Christ himself is arrayed in robes of glory and garments of light.

*We don't* think of the Man of Sorrows, stripped of his robes and bearing the marks of flogging and a crown of thorns. *We don't* expect the Bridegroom to come with his hands bound with ropes, carrying not a kingly scepter but the reed given him by mocking soldiers. And we probably can't imagine *why* this image of Jesus the Bridegroom should appear in Holy Week - or why I even mention it tonight, of all nights.

"When's the wedding?" Every engaged couple is asked that question. When we get calls about doing a wedding here at St. Paul's, that's the first question Pastor Rod, Debbie, I - and especially Donna

Beall - ask! When's the wedding? If we asked that of Jesus, what would be His answer?

*In my passion, death and burial - that is when I wed you, my beloved, my joy, my bride.* That would be Jesus' answer. Think of it. Instead of going to a stag party "mourning" the loss of bachelorhood the night before the nuptials, Jesus, who from the beginning loved his own - symbolized by the Twelve - loves them to the end, and kneels and washes their feet. Instead of the quaint old line, "with my body I thee worship," Jesus says, "This is my body, given for you. This is my blood, poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins." Instead of exchanging rings, he exchanges his righteousness and holiness for our sins on a cross. Instead of pledging his faithfulness "till death do us part", he pledges it past death itself.

Instead of sporting a tux and spit-shined shoes, Jesus is stripped nearly naked, flogged, spat on, and beaten. Instead of a stretch limo to the church and a walk down the aisle, He walks the Via Dolorosa. Instead of groomsmen, bridesmaids, happy friends and family crowding the church to celebrate, Jesus is betrayed, deserted, and denied by His nearest and dearest - in fact, by His betrothed. By His followers. By His Church. *By us.* No rice is thrown by well-wishers; only taunts and jeers are hurled His way. No bridal chamber awaits Him and His bride at the luxury hotel; instead, He is lowered into a borrowed tomb. His

honeymoon is a sojourn in the depths of hell, whose gates He crashes and breaks and whose residents are given His strong arm to cling to if they will take it.

These sacred Three Days are the solemnity of the nuptial feast of our Lord Jesus with His Church - with *us*. Though we have been wayward and faithless, fickle and frightened, He has wooed us faithfully. Though we have scoffed and snickered, been embarrassed or resentful, still He comes to us, down on one knee, asking again and again: "Will you marry me?"

Though our sins have sullied us and harmed one another and we've done everything but throw the engagement ring back in His face, still Jesus comes, in gentleness and great humility. He removes the filthy garments of our sin, and lovingly clothes us in His robes of righteousness and joy - the ones He was stripped of by mocking hands. He willingly wears a crown of thorns so that he may lay the bridal veil of forgiveness upon our heads with gentle hands and loving words: "In obedience to the *command* of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by His authority and in His stead, I forgive you all your sins."

He willingly endures the lash of the whip, the spitting scorn of the soldiers, the filth and sweat and blood of the Cross - so that He

may wash the grime of sin and sorrow from our feet and from our very hearts, and make us ready to greet Him as our beloved.

He willingly drinks the sour wine they gave him at this strange "Wedding", at Golgotha, saving the best wine till the end - the wine we will drink with Him in His kingdom forever.

Perhaps our Lord would not take it amiss if I took the wedding-and-bridegroom theme one step further and said that tonight, in a sense, is the rehearsal dinner. We are beginning to "rehearse" the great story of salvation, the great love story of God for His people. We're learning our lines and responses. We're being made ready: the laying on of forgiving hands; the practice at being self-forgetfully humble in the foot-washing; the foretaste of that never-ending feast to come, the banquet of the Lamb and His Bride, is shared tonight.

And if tonight is the rehearsal, then the wedding takes place when we gather at the foot of His Cross, where with His very life he seals His vows to us for eternity. And at the Easter Vigil, we participate in the consummation of the nuptials, the consummation of His Passion for us, the consummation of being made one flesh with Him in the waters of Baptism and in His Body and Blood given so intimately for us; the beginning of the new creation, the new life as the dearly beloved, eternally-cherished bride of the dearly-beloved Bridegroom.

I think it's fitting that Donna Beall usually makes sure the water basins, pitchers, and towels are at the ready for the Maundy - the foot-washing that is done with the words, "A new commandment I give you: that you love each other as I have love you." After all Donna is our wedding coordinator. She takes each about-to-be-married couple through the church, and through the many steps that are necessary to make their wedding happen. And here, we rehearse, and remember, and are re-made as people who know that, young or old, male or female, single or married, gay or straight, divorced or widowed, in company with Christians of every time and place, individually and collectively we are more than just sinners for whom Christ died. We are the Bride of Christ; we are His beloved, for whom He willingly has given His life, and to whom He faithfully has pledged His life. We are His darling, His delight, His pride and joy.

May our fervent prayer, and our life's task, be that by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, we love Him with all our hearts, and out-do one another in sharing that love with one another, until that day when Christ indeed is all in all.