One of the industries which has definitely been hit hard by COVID is the wedding industry, so many across the globe cancelled their weddings or postponed them to a later date. There are certain events we don’t want to postpone or cancel, especially a life changing one like a wedding which takes so much planning and preparation. Perhaps the pandemic has led us to reevaluate hosting big and somewhat lavish events, you don’t need a vast crowd to declare your love and commitment to another person. Weddings have certainly reduced in size over the last few months, but have still been wonderful celebrations. To witness the love of two people sealed in the Sacrament of Marriage is indeed a privilege. Obviously, one would like the presence of one’s family and friends, those closest and dear to us, and it is sad when invitations can’t be accepted for various reasons, such as a reluctance or fear to travel, or because of other restrictions. Having had to host many, many events over the course of my priesthood, I am always somewhat amazed and taken aback when people reply with an affirmative to an invitation, and then fail to turn up but never call or write to explain why!

Maybe invitations don’t hold as much sway or commitment as they did in the past. Sometimes there are good reasons why a person is unable to attend, or perhaps a better offer has taken precedence, or they simply can’t be bothered and apathy rules! An invitation is somewhat sacred, as it invites you to share in another person’s life, or other people’s lives, which should never be taken for granted. Some invitations make us feel very special. I remember framing the invitation I received to a Garden Party at Buckingham Palace, even though I was one among a few thousand others. And if today’s first reading from the Prophet Isaiah was posted as an invite it would be very difficult to decline: “You are invited to a feast of rich food and choice wines.” And it does not stop there: “Juicy, rich food and pure, choice wines.” Sounds like a wine connoisseurs description of heaven…..“pure choice wines.” And not only is it a banquet of rich food and choice wines, but also where death is declared destroyed and tears wiped from every face. This now sounds like heaven! And that is exactly what it is meant to sound like. Heaven is often seen and described as a banquet.

Because at banquets, parties, celebrations, we simply rejoice together, barriers are broken down, we enjoy the company of those we have never met before, where people of every race and language gather together around a table without fear or threat of discrimination. Banquets, parties, should always bring people together and not drive them apart, even if a family dynamic is somewhat dysfunctional! If it’s a wedding banquet, it is the love between two people which brings us together. If it is the Eucharistic Banquet, which we are celebrating right here and now, it is the love of Jesus Christ, who poured out his life for us upon the Cross on Calvary and rose victorious from the dead, it is God’s eternal love which brings us together. Love is always the driving force behind celebrations, whether it be a meal out with friends, a wedding reception, or simply gathering with one’s family around the kitchen table, it is love and friendship which brings us together.
No matter what the family dynamic maybe at any given time, we do not allow our differences to stop us, prevent us from celebrating our love and friendship for each other. Love conquers all things! It is the same at this Eucharistic Table. Whatever our differences maybe (which are highlighted at election time) they are redeemed by God’s love, through his Son Jesus Christ, at this Eucharistic Table, the Banquet of Eternal Life, where we proclaim unreservedly that death has ultimately been destroyed, and affirm that while many tears are shed upon this earth, they will be dried in heaven.

The Church is now encouraging us to return to celebrate the Banquet of Eternal Life in person, and not simply to watch it on our screens at home. ‘Live Streaming’ has certainly been a blessing, and will continue for those who should remain at home because of their vulnerability, but for the rest of us we should be eager and willing to come in person to celebrate the feast. Our parish ‘Live Streaming’ has united us with people across the globe, and it will continue (at least for the Saturday Vigil and Sunday morning Mass) but nothing can replace, as I have said before, gathering in person, while maintaining proper precautions, being sensitive and respectful to one another, as we journey together through this pandemic.

Jesus would have stirred the emotions of the religious leaders of his day with today’s Gospel parable. Jesus was always eager to break through their exclusive mentality. I don’t know if you have been invited to a party, dinner, and you felt out of place or uncomfortable, maybe insecure. I think when we come to Mass, the Eucharist, it is healthy to feel somewhat uncomfortable because we know that we are going to be challenged, like the chief priests and elders, by the words of Jesus. Feeling uncomfortable can either make us walk away or reevaluate our feelings, why we think or feel the way we do. Has Jesus touched a sore spot, have we become complacent about our faith, somewhat indifferent to the invitation (like the guy who is cast out for failing to wear the wedding garment)? Has this Banquet become somewhat routine and lost its bite, its punch? We surely want to be challenged by Jesus more than anyone else.

At present it seems that every politician is challenging us to embrace their philosophy, their thinking, but as Christians we will not be able to discern the choices they place before us unless we fully absorb into our hearts and minds the truth, the commands, the words of Jesus Christ. Having invited everyone into the Banquet Hall, and broken the chain of exclusivity, why on earth is the king so concerned about what someone is wearing? Surely it is who we are, and not what we wear which takes precedence? And that is most certainly true, the garment is simply the outward sign of the person’s heart. If you have accepted the invitation, you have accepted the way of life you have been invited into. We get invited to believe and trust so many things in the course of day, a week. We are bombarded with advertisements of one kind an another. With just one click we are invited to believe that a certain brand of shoes will change our love life, or a certain cream will remove the lines on our faces. And if we believe them, or show the slightest interest, that particular company or brand will hold onto us forever! Be careful when an invitation sounds like the one you have been waiting and longing for all your life.
Nothing outweighs the invitation of Jesus Christ to come to the Banquet of Eternal Life, our “Highway to Heaven.” Week in, week out, day in, day out we proclaim the greatest story ever told, Jesus Christ has destroyed death and restored life. And while many tears are shed on earth each day, we would drown in them if we did not have this knowledge, this truth to carry in our hearts. We need to come to the Banquet to celebrate our eternal destiny, to be challenged by our Savior, to enjoy each other’s company, to rejoice in our differences, and affirm our unity as sons and daughters of God. It is this Banquet which keeps us on the right path, aligns our hearts to God’s heart, Christ’s heart, preventing us from ever thinking or believing God’s love is exclusive, that the Kingdom is for the few and not the many. Yes, by accepting the invitation we accept the Gospel way of life, with no ifs or buts. We proudly put on our wedding garment, our baptismal garment, the outward sign of our Christian dignity, hoping and praying that through the quality of our lives, we will bring our dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven! Amen!