

Devotional

The following was delivered by the Rev. Eric O. Springsted at a recent meeting of the Reformed Institute's Company of Teachers. Dr. Springsted is Interim Pastor at Swarthmore Presbyterian Church and has served other congregations in that capacity in addition to teaching and lecturing on philosophy and religion at the college and seminary level.

My text is Matthew 22:1-14, the parable of the wedding banquet. Here folks who were first invited refused to come, but then, when those in the highways and byways are brought in, some of those who fail to dress appropriately are bounced from the hall. The way I would like to think about this text is by using the very recent Irish film "Calvary."

The film begins simply by showing this quote:

"Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned."

The quote is attributed to St. Augustine but is in a version according to Samuel Beckett. That exact quote has not been found in Augustine. But there is the same thought in his *Sermons on the Gospel of John*, and it is helpful to see his fuller version:

"So we are faced with two contrary dangers, hope and despair. The one is deceived by hope who says, 'God is good, God is tender hearted, let me do what I like, what gives me pleasure; let me loosen the reins on my lusts, let me carry out the desire of my soul'...These people are endangered by hope. Endangered by despair, however, are those who have fallen into grave sins, thinking that they certainly can no longer be forgiven, even if they repent and see themselves as certainly destined for damnation... Despair kills these, the others are killed by hope."

The story of "Calvary" takes place in western Ireland and western Ireland here looks pretty idyllic and untouched by the larger world. The story at points appears simply to be a story of a priest and his parish operating as things used to operate in rural Catholic Ireland. At its center is Father James Lavelle, who is what a priest of the old school was like when the old school was at its best. We see him giving communion to his neighbors, offering sage counsel to them, interfering in their business whenever his care for their well-being dictates he do so, but who also knows human frailty and is willing to cut them some slack. He is a man of common sense, and whenever he is fed a line or lame theory excusing bad behavior, he cuts it short by saying "that's nonsense."

But things are not so idyllic. At the very outset, Father James is speaking to a parishioner in the confessional, and the man confesses in graphic terms that as a child he was abused for years by priests. As a result, he says, he has determined that he will kill Father James in two weeks' time. Not because he holds Father James responsible; he is innocent, the man admits. Rather he will do it because Father James is innocent just as the man himself was innocent when he encountered evil in a cassock as a child.

It soon becomes evident that things are a lot darker than they might first appear in this town. Pretty much every one of his neighbors that James meets makes remarks that are critical not just of the Catholic Church, but about Christianity at its root, and all religion for that matter. Their lives are a matter of massive indifference to anything higher, and are frankly disdainful of anything that might remind them of any higher duty. Their grievances against the church, which are the usual lineup of church criticisms, many of which are accurate, are not so heartfelt as that they simply cover up careless lives – lives of drug use, violence, infidelity, alcoholism, and even high financial corruption. These folk may hate the church, but secular society as they play it out is a moral disaster area. So, even when James offers them a sense of forgiveness and grace and hope, and friendship, they are not about to take it. They mock forgiveness, grace, hope and friendship. And then the way that they look at life is colored accordingly. In one of the film's darkest moments, Father James while walking along the road falls in step with a young girl also going the way he is. He enters into a friendly chat with her, until suddenly her panicked father drives up and orders Father James to stay the hell away from his child. He clearly thought that there was no other motive for his talking to her other than a predatory one.

That is a tough row to hoe for a priest. And it is particularly hard as the time appointed for his murder approaches. James starts falling apart, especially after his church is burned down and his dog killed. He nearly runs away, and gets as far as the airport. But once there as he watches a coffin being loaded onto the plane, the coffin of a tourist who had been killed in a road accident, something he told a parishioner earlier in the week clearly dawns on him. In talking about faith in that earlier conversation, Father James had noted to the man who seemed to have lost his, that so many people have faith because they are afraid of death. That sort of faith, he said, is lost very easily. Thus, in the face of death, he returned to face death.

Now, since this movie has left the theaters, I can tell you the ending. Father James does go to meet his assassin, and he is killed.

What are we to make of this story? On the one hand, one way of looking at it is to see Father James as a Christ figure, one who is willing to suffer and die for his flock. Okay. But really that is not quite right, I think. It would be a cliché in fact, and this story is better than that. For the fact of the matter is that Father James, like those in his parish, is not the Son but someone who got dragged in from the highways and the byways to the party. He didn't become incarnate sinless from heaven. He had been an alcoholic, sobering up only when his wife died. And it was at that time that he discerned a call to the priesthood. But in doing so, he also had to leave a daughter behind. Some of the story's most important moments are between him and his adult daughter, as she learns to forgive him for his absence when she needed him, and as their bond of the heart is cemented in a love that goes beyond hurt. These moments are some of the few moments of grace in a world that is crying out for meaning at the same time it turns its back on the offer of love and meaning.

So the story is really a contrast between those who rejected the invitation to the wedding banquet and who refused the wedding garment, and those who were invited in, and accepted it, and who dressed for the party. But what is the garment that those folks wore? Well, it is not moral perfection; Father James clearly isn't morally perfect, although he is better than when he

was drinking. The garment rather is his acceptance of a new life. It is his subsequent willingness to share life with others even when they reject it. It is his courage in the face of death, and also his refusal to hate or to run away from his murderer, or to wreak further violence on that already violated man. The garment he wears, the party garb he dons for the kingdom, is the gracious opportunity he offered to others; it is the hope he gave them. They had presumed, and their lives clearly showed the damning effects of such presumption. He had not despaired, and he was saved. And he was saved simply by offering the same gift he had received to others, even if they turned their backs on it.

Now, that story might still be pretty bleak since the one ray of hope and of faithfulness is extinguished, and all those who presumed, and who led damnable lives were the only ones who were left. Except for the final moment. Father James is dead. His killer is in prison. But we see at the end, his daughter Fiona entering the prison, and going to visit her father's killer. The last we see is each of them picking up the phone that allows them to communicate across the glass partition separating them in the prison's visiting room. We do not hear what they say to each other. But could it be anything other than her willingness to forgive him, to invite him, the afflicted and the guilty to the banquet of the kingdom just as James had been invited? And if that is so, and I cannot help but believe that it is, then perhaps the garment that James learned to wear, and that now his daughter was wearing, might be passed along once again. We really don't know how things will turn out for the murderer if that is the case. But as Augustine hopefully said, "Do not despair, one of the thieves was saved."