

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Nov 5th 2013

Although we only hear about three of them in the Gospel today, we all know that there are ten thousand reasons we can give for not showing up at God's dinner table:

I have other things to do.

Who will miss me if I just stay home?

There will be time to eat later – this must be done now.

I will never show up if s/he is there too.

God doesn't really want me there anyway; this is just a pity invitation...

Take your pick or insert your own, without a doubt there are lots. Looking at my own life, I'm fairly sure I've rattled off a couple thousand such excuses. And even while I knew they were exactly that – excuses – I've even managed to convince myself with a few of the best.

When I step back and see this tendency to beg off the invitation to join all the saints in the dining room of the Lord for what it is, rejection, I feel sad, deflated. Like my own excuses are exactly what is keeping me from their holy company. I reread Leon Bloy's famous quote – “the only real sadness, the only real failure, the only great tragedy in life, is not to become a saint” – and feel my refusals as a sad tragedy.

But there is another something to notice about this: all of these feelings are themselves very enclosed. They are all paying more attention to what my refusals do to me than what they do to the one who is refused.

When I'm able to lift my head up a bit, look beyond the carefully-guarded walls of my heart and pay attention to what my refusal to sit at the table with saints and be fed does to that God, a steady feeling emerges. It is God who is sad at my refusal. It is God who is sad that this table (so carefully prepared, so full of all the things that would bring me joy) has been rejected. After all, all he wants from any of us is our companionship at such a carefully prepared table, isn't it? Yes.

But can't you hear the dark excuses piling up even still? Even in the face of this gentlest of invitations? There are times when I can.

Listen to those new excuses. Notice them. But don't be afraid of them. They're there, so shine a soft light on them. See where they come from.

Will it be too hard to take our seat at the table? Yes, it can be hard to sit in the company of the God of our lives.

Will it demand that we change? Yes, sitting down at that table for any length of time probably will change us, and irrevocably.

Will such a change be difficult? Yes, it will probably hurt to change; the refining fire will likely burn.

It's worth it.

Today is a feast day for all of us, the feast day of all those Jesuits who have, over the last five hundred years, been named saints or blessed by our Church. It's a great day to celebrate the lives of St. Ignatius and St. Francis Xavier, St. Alphonsus Rodrigues and St. Alberto Hurtado.

But it's a great day for another reason as well. It's a great day because even these saintly brothers had excuses. They are not saints because they were never selfishly focused on their own refusals, or ever struggled to take their seat at a carefully prepared table. They are not saints because, having overcome one set of excuses, no more arose. And they are not seated – even now, right now – at the table of the God because they always said yes to every invitation they were given. They are saints because they were able to look into the face of the God who wanted to sit with them and see there a love worth more than excuses, and say to that God: help me make no more excuses. I want to sit with you, help me say yes.

The same for us. No more excuses for us.

No more acceding to the dark voices trying to convince us that we are a charity case; not really wanted, just tolerated, at the adult table.

No more rejection of the one who wants – above all things, all things – to be in our presence.

No more of the great tragedy of failing to be saints.

Let us instead take our seats at the table, and feel the great joy our God has in being seated beside us.

Nay rather, I have stilled and quieted / my soul like a weaned child. / Like a weaned child on its mother's lap, / so is my soul within me.

Paddy Gilger, S.J.