

SERMON IN BARMEN WORLD COMMUNION DAY, 2011

Exodus 32:1-14

Matthew 22:1-14

Today, millions of Christians all over the world are gathered around the Table in a feast that celebrates, with thanksgiving, our Lord Jesus Christ – that His body was broken, and His blood was shed for our redemption. This is World Communion Sunday. It is a very important day because as we respond to the Lord's invitation here in this historic sanctuary in Barmen to feast with our Lord Jesus Christ at this table, many before from New Zealand to Europe have done the same, and millions of others from the next time zone to Samoa will be doing the same. What a wonderful family feast that binds you and I, women and men, young and old, no matter our countries of origin together – all because we have responded to God's call to partake in a feast. It is a feast which has already begun but will be fully fulfilled at the fullness of time.

Today, we have the opportunity to reflect on three feasts.

- The feast offered by Aaron in the Old Testament passage read for us
- The feast offered by the King in our Lord's parable in the New Testament passage.
- This feast (the Holy Communion) that we are about to partake in shared by millions of others today

The Old Testament tells of a feast offered by Aaron in honour of the Golden calf that was constructed to represent the god who brought the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses and Aaron had been leading the people of Israel from Egypt to the promised land. They had been faithful in pointing out that it was the Almighty God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that was leading them. At this point in the journey, Moses had gone up to the mountain to meet with the Almighty God. He stayed much longer than the people expected. So the people began to wonder, not only about whether or not Moses would return, but also about the truth of a God capable of leading them whom they have never seen physically. It was a time of uncertainty. The outcome of these wonderings and doubts was that they prevailed upon Aaron to make them a god that they can see and touch. So they constructed this god with their possessions, their precious metals. When this god was constructed in the form of a calf, Aaron invited the people to a feast. A feast in which in a time of uncertainty they could celebrate something they could put their trust in. The only problem was – this was not God, and their trust was misplaced.

God was angry with the people of Israel for this action and threatened to destroy them.

We also live in uncertain times. We trust in God to take care of us here in Germany, and to take care of all the peoples of the world. Yet what human experience with all the bad news around us often gives a picture of a God who has gone so far away and is not returning. Life has become so difficult for many. Apart from the natural disasters, conflicts, poverty and other challenges plaguing our world that we

constantly see and hear of on our news, closer to home we are aware of the shape of the economy, which is rendering a harsh climate for jobs and a good standard of living. Even the value of the Euro has been dropping at such an alarming rate. Those who are able then often retreat into the gods they know how – raising their questions in terms of how can we find the gods who can protect us at times like this. So for some the answer is to invest in GOLD. For others it is to find the safe-haven currencies such as the Swiss franc. For those who succeed, there is a good reason to celebrate at the feast of knowing that one is somewhat safe from the uncertainties of our times.

In the second story, Jesus told of a King who offered another feast – but many of the invited guests were very reluctant to come. They were not ready to come because of their own pre-occupations. They went to attend to their own fields and businesses. Some were even violent – mistreated the servants and killed them. There must have been something about this feast which was unattractive to those who wanted to focus on their own business. So they chose not to go. They chose to snob the King, and to even act violently against the King's messengers. In response to this, the King punished those who were earlier invited and invited ordinary people from the streets and highways to come, and they came. Apparently, there was one of those who actually came who still acted in a manner that represented snobbish behaviour towards the King. He did not have the appropriate wedding garments. This person too was punished.

Today, it may be so easy to judge the characters in this story, especially those who snobbed the King as knowing no better. Or even to judge the King as being too brutal and violent in the punishments meted out to those who did not respond in the right way to his invitation. Whatever our judgements are, and we are entitled to them, the point of this account is not about those details. It is about a choice of responding in the right way to the invitation offered to participate in the feast of the Kingdom of God.

This brings us to this feast that we are celebrating in the whole world today. Unlike Aaron's invitation to a feast to honour a god which can feel soothing in a time of uncertainty, this is the feast of God who suffered and died for us and understands the uncertainties. My favourite theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, spells out in His book *The Crucified God*, how it is this action of God who defies the idea of an unchangeable deity actually gives His life for us – and this is where we find hope in the face of all that negates life. This is what we celebrate in this feast. This is what God is happy with – not with the counterfeit offered by Aaron to soothe the people.

Unfortunately, many who are invited to this feast, are too busy with their own business and their own ideas of how to enjoy life to respond positively. Others may actually ridicule the church or even do violence to the church in some communities as the church faithfully proclaims this message of the invitation. Yet others may decide to come to the feast, but in their own ways, dressed the way they want without paying any attention to the values God attached to those who partake in this feast.

This church is different. When it responded, it also paid attention to the Lord of the feast. 77 years ago in these historic grounds, faithful servants of God indicated

clearly that we cannot partake in this feast without wearing the right wedding garments – We cannot partake in this feast without standing up for justice even if it has dire consequences meted out by those who are in power. So the Barmen declaration emerged as a living witness to the faithfulness of the confessing church which responded to the invitation to come to this table. Decades later, we followed their example in stating clearly that we cannot eat together at this feast when some people are excluded in parts of our communities on racial grounds. So the status confessionis on apartheid of the then World Alliance of Reformed Churches emerged. Soon after that the Belhar Confession was adopted in South Africa. In the early part of this Century, the Accra Confession was adopted as we seek to respond to a similar question around this invitation – how can we eat together around the same table while the global economy and how we treat the environment deals death to so many in the world.

Our response to this invitation to come to this feast has implications for our commitment to the Lord who has invited us. This ought to reflect on our lifestyles at home, at work, at church and in the world.

Would we choose to respond to feasts such as Aaron's in honour of soothing gods of our days? Would we choose to snob the invitation of the King of Kings' to the important feast because we have things which we deem are more important? Would we choose to partake in the feast each time without allowing God to give us the right kind of garments, the right kind of values that align ourselves with the implications of the Kingdom of God?

Any of these three choices could lead to disastrous consequences.

The real choice that our Scripture passages offer us is to respond to the invitation with our whole hearts and to put on the wedding garments God has provided. These include being willing to live in a manner that affects how we live – being instruments of God's justice and God's transformation of the world. After all, as we partake in this meal we do so fully aware that we have sisters and brothers who are partaking in it from Bangladesh, Haiti, the Horn of Africa, the Pacific Islands and other places which may be suffering. Together with them, let us all live in a way that all of us can enjoy God's feast of life.

So on this World Communion Day, we are invited. Let us enjoy the feast. Let us be faithful in inviting others to enjoy the feast. Let us live with the values of this feast. Amen.