Though not too many people can say they have been to heaven, I think it's safe to say we all want to go there. But while grace is a free gift from God, what does it really mean to focus on going to heaven? And what will it be like?

Well for one, as Isaiah tells us it will be a great feast for "all peoples" and we see in these readings how deep the love God is for us, wanting us to come to the great feast that He has prepared for us. But getting there, we need to remember that the need to respond to the invitation that we are given is urgent, and also need to remember that the journey to that banquet can at times be difficult, but when we prepare, we can do so much to be ready for that great day the doors to the banquet hall are open, and also do so much to bring other people to that banquet as well.

A few years ago, Jozef and Wiktoria Ulma, a Polish husband and wife, were beatified by Pope Francis the Ulma family led an ordinary life against the backdrop of the Second World War. Josef worked in the fields, while Wiktoria managed their home and cared for their six children and another on the way. Through their simple daily routines, they exemplified the teachings of the Gospel. There were family prayers, shared faith education,

and Bible readings that turned their household into what Pope John Paul II termed a "domestic Church," extending their warmth and support even to the most vulnerable members of society, including Jews who faced immense danger.

Jozef was the son of Martin and Franciszka (née Kluz). His parents had a small farm where he helped since he was a young boy. He completed a four-grade primary school and, in 1921, was called up for military service. In 1929, he enrolled at an agricultural school, where he graduated with excellent results.

He set up the first fruit tree nursery in Markowa in the southeastern part of Poland and soon began to make a living from the sale of saplings. It was probably thanks to him that grafted apple trees appeared in the area. In addition to gardening, Józef promoted fruit and vegetable growing. He was also a pioneer in beekeeping and silkworm breeding.

He was a man of broad horizons; he studied electrical engineering and constructed a bookbinding machine and a household wind turbine, which made him the first in the village to light his house with electricity rather than

a paraffin lamp. Józef's greatest passion was photography. At first, he used a self-assembled camera, but with time he started using professional equipment, thanks to which he documented the everyday life of the inhabitants of Markowa. He was also a social activist and managed a dairy co-op.

Wiktoria was socially involved and also from a large family. She performed in the village theatre and married Józef in 1935, and their children soon came into the world. At the time of her death, she was in advanced pregnancy with her seventh child.

Faith was the foundation of life for the Ulma family. They were dedicated members of their parish church and prayed daily as a family. The godmother of the Ulmas 'third child later recalled what she witnessed when she stayed a week with the family. With Wiktoria recovering from childbirth, each night Jozef gathered his children around her bed. Holding their mother's hands, the family knelt and prayed the Rosary together.

Before the outbreak of World War II, at least 120,000 Jews lived in their region of Poland. Among almost 4,500 inhabitants of Markowa, there were

about 120 people of the Jewish faith. Their houses were scattered across the village, and Jewish residents went to the synagogue in Łańcut for major celebrations. The Jews of Markowa were mainly engaged in trade, and only a few were farmers.

Even before the war, Józef Ulma had been on very good terms with the Jews. A few Jewish families lived next door to him, and he traded the vegetables he grew with others.

The wartime terror soon began to take its toll. On 23 November 1939, the regulation that all Jews over the age of 10 must wear armbands with a Star of David on their arms came into force. Other restrictions soon followed: compulsory work, a ban on using means of transport, or leaving the place of residence without permission. Jews were placed in ghettos or sent to labor camps.

In 1941, the Nazis decided on a “Final Solution of the Jewish Question” and the fate of the Jews became tragic, with millions losing their lives. In 1941, unlike in the occupied countries in Western Europe, in the Polish territories,

the Germans introduced the death penalty for any help given to the Jews. About a thousand Poles were murdered because of this.

Operation “Reinhardt,” which had been in progress since March 1942 and aimed at murdering all the Jews in the area the Ulmas lived in began to be implemented in late July and early August 1942. The Germans imposed a ban on Jews staying in the area and began deporting them to concentration camps.

Some of the Markowa Jews then asked the Ulmas for help. Initially, Józef helped them to build dugouts on the outskirts of the village. There was a family of four, the Ryfkis, with whom he helped to build a shelter in a ravine near the stream. He’d also go beyond that to help Jews; eight Jews knocked on the Ulmas ’door. When the Germans patrolled the areas where the dugouts were built, he agreed to hide them in his attic.

Hiding a Jew was a capital offense. Jozef and Wiktoria knew this, but they took in the Jewish families anyway. Observing how much food Jozef was buying, other villagers became suspicious, and a German collaborator (who was later killed by the Polish Underground) reported them, and in the early

hours of March 24, 1944, German officers broke into the Ulma home. Racing up to the attic, they killed all eight of the men, women, and children hiding there. Then, the German officers dragged the Ulma family from their home. The officers shouted for villagers to come and watch so they might see the consequences of harboring Jews. With a crowd of their neighbors and friends watching, an officer killed Jozef and then Wiktoria, who was 8 months pregnant. They then took the lives of the children and ordered that the villagers dig a pit to dispose of the bodies.

Remarkably, the public execution of the Ulma family did not have the effect the German officers intended it to. Twenty-one other Jews were hidden in the homes of that small village, and all of them saw the liberation of the village by Allied Forces three months later. Those families, all fellow parishioners at St. Dorothy's, followed the example of the Ulmas and continued to risk their lives for those who were in need.

In 1995, Wiktoria and Józef Ulma were awarded the "Righteous Among the Nations" title by Israel. In 2010, they were honored with the Commander's Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta by the President of the Republic of Poland, Lech Kaczyński. The poor couple from Markowa became patrons

of many schools and streets. Their name is also given to the only Museum of Poles Saving Jews during World War II in Poland, which opened in Markowa in March 2016. They were beatified by Pope Francis in September of 2023.

What their whole lives were about was responding to the invitation God had given them; through how they lived and loved one another, and how they extended that love to the Jewish people.

Our parable this week is about the invitation God has given us. Heaven is like a wedding banquet, the most amazing one we can ever imagine. God became human so that we might become one with Him sharing in divine life. To miss that is to miss everything. But as we all know some reject this; the Nazis quite literally killed the messengers of God in various ways, but what they did has been repeated by Communists and persecutors of faith up and down the ages. What we've seen though time and time again is how people get caught up in these lies of where happiness is; for remember Hitler was one man, a failed painter, who then developed a following and whipped people into a frenzy, causing actions like happened in Poland and to the Ulmas to occur over and over again by people who

had presumably been raised in Christian homes from so called “normal” families. But even amidst Jozef and Wiktoria’s neighbors, there were those who betrayed them too. It’s what you can call the tragedy of secularism; the lie that says one can be satisfied by the goods of this world or what the world offers. We might say well we’ve learned from all that, the Nazis are long gone. But the falling for the lies of secularism continues - the seeking power or pleasure or heaven if you will in the things of earth - from a person obsessed with money, to a person overcome by lust and it destroys them or their relationships with others, to a person overcome by hate over race or politics so it destroys friendships and prevents them from seeing that all are called to God’s Kingdom; to a person overcome with a desire for power over others. It’s a tragedy that leads to emptiness.

So, the parable really asks us a question - where is your priority. And Jozelf and Wilkema could certainly have survived World War II by remaining hidden, but they realized something - they were messengers of the King, and for it they paid with their lives, but they obtained heaven.
The question then for you and me is what do we do to emulate them by responding to the invitation as they did?

When you first hear it, the parable sounds a bit unsettling or even strange; on the one hand a wedding banquet is being held for the son of the king and invitations are sent out. But then we have people who just ignore them at first. The point here is that this isn't like a Publisher's Clearing House sweepstakes invitation or junk mail; it's given from the king himself, and much like if we got an invitation from the pope to have dinner with him that came personally from him no Catholic would turn it down. But the people who get the invitation are indifferent. Such is one of the biggest problems we face of being indifferent or not having our priorities straight in life. God wants to be a part of our lives. God wants to give Himself to us again and again at Mass. For the Ulmas, they took that seriously - God is the center of their lives, which is why they prayed daily as a family, went to Mass frequently, and lived out their faith. So, a starting point is to look at where our lives are going. Are we so busy we don't have time for God? Do we think of God during the week and make time for prayer in our lives? Do we let God into our hearts and open them up to Him knowing we can come to Him with our sins and struggles, or do we just ignore them and resign ourselves to them? It's been said there is never a U-Haul in a funeral procession, but at every funeral Mass we have there is the Easter Candle next to the casket - God is with us from womb to tomb, on our part

hopefully we follow Him and recognize that. It's why at the end of the story, the man who isn't dressed properly is thrown out of the banquet hall - it seems understandable he didn't have time to get ready, but the point is knowing the significance of where he was going, he should have realized that he needed to get ready first. So, it is with us as we prepare one day to meet God. Nothing matters more than responding to this invitation.

Secondly, we have this detail of the messengers being killed by some of the people who don't want to go to the banquet. Such is the state of affairs in the world. The Ulmas realized they were not only invited, but messengers too. And as we all know, living out the faith is hard. It is hard to speak about what we believe when there's so much hate out there; in the Ulma's case, living out their faith literally got them martyred. But in our lives, there can be turbulence both in the family and in the greater world when we speak to what we believe. But it's so important to do that, because we just might save a soul. Friday afternoon I'll be joining some of our parishioners at Planned Parenthood to say the rosary; I've been doing that for about 10 years as part of the larger 40 days for life that many parishes partake in, and it's not uncommon for a person or two to drive by and let you know you are number one or shout some obscenity at you. But

I also know that because of the presence of people there, over the years people have eventually had a chance of heart because of their witness. Much like in the story of the Ulmas, their witness of their faith in part inspired others, which is why 21 people in that village survived the war because they were hidden and liberated. Think of the power we have when we do not give up to the world that seemingly has no interest in the invitation to come to the wedding banquet; when we keep praying, setting an example, speaking to our faith, and never giving up. We may suffer and suffer greatly, but we may just help a person to have a change of heart and mind and cause them to finally open the invitation God has given them.

Lastly, we must also remember who is called to this banquet, namely all people. “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will provide for all peoples” Isaiah tells us. We live in a polarized, often angry world. I even see this in myself when I get so upset about certain things in the world. But what the Ulma’s did is to realize all were called to this feast, which is what led them to go above and beyond helping people in need who needed them the most. We must never give up on people, nor be tempted to live in an echo chamber but rather challenge ourselves to seek out people. Because every day they are before us; from the person needing food and shelter; to a kid

at school who maybe is bulled or has no one to sit with at lunch; to a person saying they are doing fine when in reality maybe they are going through a very trying time; to the person who seemingly has no faith and has given up on God; to the people in our family, often right under our own roof, who need us to be really present to them and help them. Through our words and actions, we can truly make sure “All are Welcome” is not just a hymn we sing but a way of life. For as the servants are sent out to the highways and byways to go find people for the feast, so it is with us as we exit Mass and go out into the world.

How do we come to know we are invited to the greatest banquet imaginable? By learning how to prepare for when the banquet hall doors are opened and making our way there. It’s through seeing the faith in action, as did the children of Jozef and Wiktoria and their neighbors. It’s through coming to know God through being taught about him. And that is what evangelization is all about. So, on our part, may we stop making excuses, and respond today to this great message of salvation by preparing for the banquet, and bringing others to the feast.