

Sermon for Sunday 15 October 2023

19th after Trinity

Exodus 32: 1 – 14; Philippians 4: 1 – 9; Matthew 22: 1 – 14

The Wedding Banquet

When were you last invited to a wedding I wonder? It tends to go in seasons doesn't it? My son, who is 31, keeps being invited to weddings this year. Takes up many of his weekends. Is there anyone who doesn't feel happy when they are invited to a wedding? It's lovely, isn't it? The first thing I do is check my diary – to make sure I'll be able to go. Then – a bit nearer the time – I'll probably start thinking about what I'm going to wear. My first instinct is always to assume I have nothing that will do!

We all know how much effort and expense goes into planning a wedding too. It's always an honour and a privilege to be invited. There's often a 'save the date' well in advance, isn't there, before the actual invitation arrives.

I wonder if something similar has happened in our story from Matthew's Gospel. The slaves are sent out (v3) to call those who have been invited. They're to say that the dinner is now ready. It's time for the guests to come. How shocking it is then that the invited guests don't bother to turn up. They have something better to do – and they even turn on the messengers. What an insult to the host – the king.

This is the third of three parables which Jesus tells at this point in Matthew's Gospel against the Chief Priests and the Pharisees. Because they are not accepting Jesus' message – His invitation into the kingdom of God. The leaders of God's own chosen, beloved people have decided to reject Him – although many 'less important' or 'worthy' people are accepting Jesus' message.

I want to stop at this point and say that this is a difficult story. Not one that is easy to explain. The same parable also appears in Luke's Gospel. And Matthew's version is particularly violent. The King's slaves are maltreated and killed; the king takes a terrible and disproportionate

revenge for this; and one unfortunate guest is bound hand and foot and thrown out of the party. And we're hearing this story against the background of appalling and ongoing violence meted out against innocent people – on both sides - over the last week.

I don't think this is a parable which condones violence – or revenge in particular. And, in particular, I don't think we are intended to see the king in the parable as a complete picture of what God is like. I think it's a story about an earthly king, a king who invites, and who expects to be honoured by His subjects, and who is disappointed. And who reacts like an earthly king. As I said, Jesus told it specifically to get at the Pharisees and the Chief Priests – to make one point – to needle them about their rejection of Jesus, which is a dishonouring of God Himself.

So – the original honoured guests refuse the invitation. And EVERYONE off the streets is then invited in instead – both good and bad. We are privileged. This is where we come into the story.

We're all invited into the kingdom of God!
Hooray!

There's a wonderful and very famous ancient icon by Andrei Rublev of the Trinity which I spent some time reflecting on while I was on retreat recently. The three figures, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, sit around a table dressed in flowing robes. On the table is a bowl of food. And in the centre is a space. That's our seat at the table. You may know it. If not I have a small copy you can see later. For me that picture expresses God's invitation to us all. We're all invited to the table. Right up close, to Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So – we've been invited to a wedding. What are we going to wear? We're all agreed, I think, that it won't do to turn up in our ordinary everyday clothes – especially if we've been working and they are a bit grubby.

An invitation needs a response. Not a grudging response, but a heart response. We don't need to be perfectly dressed, but God looks for some sign that we are serious about accepting his invitation. It ought to make a difference to our

lives. So what does that mean? Our passage from Philippians gives us some ideas here.

Euodia and Syntyche – who have fallen out somehow – are implored to make it up.

Rejoice in the Lord – can we do that?

Be gentle – which is akin to being humble – so that everyone sees our gentleness

Don't worry – but instead – pray

Turn our minds to think about honourable, just, pure and pleasing things – rather than things that are not

Keep on doing the things that we know will please God.

Or we could think about that passage in Colossians which actually tells us to “clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. And to bear with one another” (Colossians 3: 12 f).

I wonder if one of the things in my list particularly speaks to you just now? I'm going to run through it again -

Repeat the list – and elaborate a bit (w/o Colossians)

Or there might be something else that God is nudging you about just now. You will know if there is.

God's invitation is to do something about it.

We're all invited to the heavenly banquet; we're all welcome, but God is looking and hoping for a response from our hearts. Just something small that we can do that represents that wedding garment. As small even as just a thank you. Something that shows we are honoured and grateful to be invited and we really want to be a part of God's great wedding party.

I'm going to give a few moments of silence to think about that. And then I'm going to say a prayer

Silence

Prayer –

Heavenly Father, thank you so much for freely inviting us into your kingdom; help us to see if

there is anything you are asking from us now; and
give us the grace to do it. Amen

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