

Matthew 22:1-14

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying:

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.

He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come.

Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them.

The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves,

"The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy.

Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen."

The invitation

A wedding feast - a call to party. Will you be there? In a world where you can only have 15 at your wedding and where parties are framed as seed beds for virus this is perhaps not a suitable question. But parties will eventually be back and, in terms of today's Gospel reading, the party is already in full swing. Are you in?

Two parables today. The first involving invitations, refusals and acceptances. The second involving a guest who lacks a wedding robe.

First one first. The story is improbable in the extreme. Who would refuse a royal invitation? What king would destroy his own city - his source of tax revenue? It's not a realistic story as it stands. Jesus tells it to the elders and chief priests of Jerusalem. He wants them to understand their failure. He wants them to understand that over many centuries God has reached out to them and to their predecessors - generations of national leaders and teachers - and they have failed to respond to God's calling. They have received countless invitations to the wedding banquet, so to speak, and they have not come.

God has sent his servants out with the invitation - has sent his prophets - but the nation's elders have not wanted to listen, too busy with other things. Worse. The prophets who came with God's invitation were not just ignored, some of them were marked down as troublemakers and killed.

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them."

So this is a parable recounting the nation's history with God - a history of gracious invitation and regular refusal to take notice. And now God has sent his son and the same scenario is being enacted again.

In the story, the angry king sends troops, destroys the murderers and burns their city. By the time the Gospels were written the Romans had done just that to Jerusalem. The disaster was widely interpreted as God's judgment.

But the parable does not end at this point. There is still going to be a wedding feast. *He said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.*

If those who were originally invited won't come, the king will invite others. And they won't make excuses. They come and the banqueting hall fills up.

And then we move into a second parable. *"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." For many are called, but few are chosen."*

Oh dear! Just as everything was looking up, with a hall full of happy guests ready to have a good time - to eat drink and make merry - we are back in a world of judgment and threat, of weeping and gnashing of teeth. *For many are called but few are chosen.*

Well, the gospel is meant to be good news - that's what the word means. Yes, there is judgment here, but there's also a strong dose of encouragement. In what way? Well, first, there is a lot of sending and inviting in this story. The king sends out his messengers and issues invitations. The kingdom of heaven is like this, Jesus says. That's to say, God does not leave us all guessing, he does not play hide and seek with us or stay aloof from us. God is continually reaching out to us, especially when we seem incapable of reaching out to God.

God's presence in our lives and in our world is not something we have to bring about. God is endlessly coming to us. *'When we were still far off God met us in his Son and brought us home'*. God never gives up on us, and that in itself is good news.

And who does God invite? They *'went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad, so the wedding hall was filled with guests'*. 'Both good and bad' That too is good news. People who have done good are there, people who have done bad things are there - and people like us whose lives are a mixture of both good and bad - we are also included.

This may seem outrageous in a judgmental world of blame and shame, but there it is. We are not called upon to be perfect, we are simply called to hear the invitation and to come to the banquet of the Kingdom of Heaven. All are invited and all are included.

Sorting out our lives for the better starts once we are inside the hall. God does not put bouncers on the door checking who is and who is not suitable to come to the feast. God has invited you and that qualifies you to be there. And that is very good news if you aren't sure whether you are wanted, if you doubt whether you are worthy. God invites you and wants you to come and that's enough.

So what about the man who isn't wearing a wedding robe? His fate is not good news. Just occasionally I have an anxiety dream - rarely since I retired but more often when I was in parish ministry. In this dream, I am on my way to church for the Sunday service when I suddenly realise that I've left my cassock and surplice in the vicarage and have to go back and get it. But it seems to take for ever to get there and my legs are like lead, and the clock is ticking on, and I shall be late for the service, and I can't find my robes and to cap it all, in the distance, I can hear them singing the first hymn. I'm not there and they've started without me.

I'm not an expert at the interpretation of dreams but I take this one to mean that I'm anxious that I may not be worthy to be there - I can't find the proper robe. But this is all an unnecessary anxiety because, in terms of the Kingdom of Heaven, I am worthy to be there and the robe I wear is the robe of Christ.

'Put on the Lord Jesus Christ', says Paul to the Romans (13:14) which is a forceful way of saying 'you enter on the coat-tails of Christ'. So think of the man without the wedding robe as someone who has come showing off a suit of his own design, who is saying, 'Look at me! I made this all myself. Don't I look good? See the quality of the fabric. I worked hard for that'.

But he is deluding himself. He is not at the feast because he has worked hard, done well and earned his place. He is there because God wants him there not because he deserves to be there. Nobody's worthy, but he thought he could set his own terms - wear a robe of his own design. In the Kingdom of Heaven, the robe we wear is not cut from the cloth of our own achievement. It is given us by Christ.

*Just as I am, without one plea
But that thy blood was shed for me
And that thou bids't me come to thee
O Lamb of God, I come.*

Though this is hard to take in a society orientated on achievement and success, it is good news. We are made welcome, and that is the grace of God - God's free gift. Try to work your way in and you'll miss it - like the original invitees who were so busy achieving that they had no time for the gracious free gift of God - didn't even notice that this was an invitation really worth having.

And the last thing to say, is that the Kingdom of Heaven to which we are invited and where we are all made welcome is a celebration.

Isaiah projects a glimpse of it:

The Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. (Isaiah 25:6-8a)

This is the good news that prompts Paul to exhort the Philippians:

Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice!

*David Page
11th October 2020*