

SERMON for Pentecost 19 - October 11th, 2020.

Readings: Exodus 32: 1-14; Psalm 106: 1-6, 20-24; Philippians 4: 1-9; Matthew 22: 1-14.

There is a story I heard some years ago. It is the story of a poor Irish family emigrating by ship to the United States. The Father sold all they had and managed to scrape together enough money for the tickets for the whole family, travelling in the bowels of the ship. The Mother packed up as much food as she could but knew that it wouldn't last them the whole trip, and so during the voyage the food was severely rationed. After weeks on the same small portion the youngest boy rebelled and said to his father that he couldn't take it anymore and needed to find something else to eat. His father gave him the last of the few coins he had, and the boy left to explore the ship. Hours passed and his parents started to get worried, so the father decided to go out to look for him. He searched high and low and was beginning to feel panic rising when he went into a large room and found his son sitting at a table heaped high with food.

"My son, how did you get all this food, what have you stolen to get this?" he asked.

His son turned to him with a big grin on his face; "Dad bring the others, come and share. This food is free! It is part of the ticket." ¹

In our readings this morning, we hear again of poor Moses' travails with the rebellious Israelites. Moses had been up on Mt Sinai, receiving the revelation of God's law, in what has become known as the Ten Commandments. Because he had been absent for so long, the people thought that he had deserted them. They had forgotten all that God had done for them, and in their wilfulness, chose to replace their imageless God for that of a calf moulded from gold.

The beginning of this morning's psalm reminds us to give thanks and to remember the mighty acts of the Lord. It goes on to remind us that we all have sinned, like those who have gone before us. I wonder what the 'golden calf' you have fashioned to replace God, looks like? Some of them, I'm sure, will be very subtle, but I am sure we all have something which we put in front of God from time to time.

In the Epistle today, we are hearing Paul, as the father, pastor and teacher give words of lasting advice ², as he draws this letter to the church in Philippi to a close.

Stand firm in our faith in Christ – in the way of the Lord – don't get distracted or tempted down side paths, but stay on track. Then he gives us that advice which we should nurture in our hearts for all time:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. [Phil.4:4-9]

And so we turn to the Gospel and another of Jesus' parables of the Kingdom.

Going back to the story I began with, the family starving on the boat, not realising the food was provided on the ticket, one could almost say that the kingdom of heaven is a bit like that. When we become Christians - when we take Jesus as our Lord and Saviour - we become heirs of the kingdom. But with that inheritance comes some responsibility.

Today, Jesus tells a parable about a wedding feast where the guests are invited but there is also some responsibility with that - mainly to show up! Perth Theologian, Bill Loader comments:

"This is a simple story which envisages village life. It worked like this. You announced you were having a party on a certain day. People would know you were getting it ready. When it was ready to roll, you sent word to those who had been invited. It would be very embarrassing if then hardly anyone turned up. This is what happened in the story. So the person throwing the party decided that the best thing would be just to invite anyone in the village whom they ran across. Like many of Jesus' parables, the experience would have rung bells for people. It was easy to relate to. What was Jesus saying? One can almost hear the response; 'Pretty flaming obvious, mate!' Jesus was annoyed about being turned down, rejected.

Heard in its broader perspective, this story contains echoes which allow us to see that this was anything but a Jesus ego-trip. Like the prophets before him, Jesus often spoke of the kingdom of God as a great feast. The call to respond to the good news of God's kingdom was an invitation to the feast. The invitation had gone out, the people had been summoned to come, but they refused. They made excuses. Too busy, too distracted to come to the party. So the invitation is extended to others. Jesus' pious compatriots refuse him; and yet the sinners respond positively.

The alternative guests are a feature of the story which was bound in time to be linked not only with the irreligious, but also with all outcasts and eventually with Gentiles (in Luke's gospel he especially links the 'outcasts' with people marginalised through disability and poverty). The parable then became a story in which the church identified itself as those who had responded in contrast to those who refused the invitation."

Just when hearers might have been tempted to retreat into a self-righteous sectarian huddle, bemoaning how evil the world is out there, Matthew expands the parable to bring the spotlight on those who turn up at the feast. 'Where's your suit and tie?' Whatever the expectation, someone came wrongly dressed. The breach of this cultural norm may mean little for those who know God looks on the heart (although it is fascinating how it persists in various forms today - such as what is thought to be suitable to wear to church!), but it serves Matthew as a vehicle for challenging his hearers about clothing one's life in righteousness, a familiar image. It is Matthew's theme (Jesus' theme, John the Baptist's theme) returning: no privilege on the basis of status, not even the status of having joined the Christian community. Only a life of transformed attitude and performance counts." ³

So the focus is now on the wedding guest who turned up in the wrong clothes. 'Where's your suit and tie?' So what you may well ask - I mean, if the wedding guest had been brought in at the last minute from the highways and byways. Well the custom of the time was for the wedding guests to be given special clothes to wear for the feast and so it would have been an incredible insult, unthinkable in that culture, to refuse to wear the clothes provided. Not only was the guest insulting and shaming the host but showing himself to be arrogant beyond belief. ⁴

There is a lot of shaming and insulting going on in this parable. The refusal of those who had been initially invited to the feast would have insulted the king. But when some of them seized his servants, beat them and even resort to murder, this really challenges the king's honour.

The king then has a go at breaking the social rules by inviting those from the streets in to share his celebration. "In antiquity, meals were an exclusive affair. Inclusive table fellowship in the early Christian community caused problems as St Paul notes in some of his letters."

So, the obvious interpretation of this parable for the point which Jesus is making, is that the first invited to the feast are the Jews but they rejected God's invitation by making excuses, filling their religious life with rules and regulations which were too onerous to fulfil, and turning their back on their vocation to be a light to all nations; and they rejected God's invitation to the wedding feast of his Son - they rejected Jesus and the message he brought. So God opened the invitation to all peoples, inviting them to come into the kingdom via the taking of the gospel to all people by the disciples.

But what about the wedding clothes? Some say that they are clothes of righteousness which we can choose to put on or not, others suggest that it is our response to God and when we don't respond by helping others, that is our refusal to put on the wedding clothes. ⁶

Tom Wright in his commentary on this aspect, warns us that God's kingdom is a kingdom in which love and justice and truth and mercy and holiness reign unhindered. They are the clothes we need to wear for the wedding. And if we refuse to put them on, we are saying that we don't want to stay at the party. ⁷

Maybe, like the family in the story, we have not had the perception that, in accepting the ticket, the food is included – that in accepting Christianity as our faith, we are not following through with all that it entails.

Rather than be like the Israelites, whinging and whining through forty years in the desert, let us set aside our golden calf and, as Paul says, stand firm in our faith and be all we can be, find that the feast is part of the ticket and allow our hearts to be filled with a burning for justice, a heart to help those less fortunate than ourselves and a thirst for a closer relationship with our God. He gives us the wedding clothes and invites us to his feast - let us put them on and join in the kingdom.

In the name of God, Source of all being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Revd Sally Buckley
11 October 2020

REFERENCES:

1. based on a story by Thomas Keating.
2. *Preaching through the Christian Year A*, Craddock, Hayes, Holladay & Tucker, p.472, © 1992.
3. Bill Loader; *First thoughts on Passages from Matthew in the Lectionary*.
4. Sunday Journal number 75; *gospel notes*
5. John J. Pilch; *The Cultural World of Jesus - Year A*
6. Ralph Milton; *rumors*.
7. Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*.