

Corona Season (11.10.20)
Trinity 18

Isaiah 25.6-9
Philippians 4.1-9
Matthew 22.1-14/Luke 14.15-24

THE WEDDING BANQUET

The gospels generally do not give a verbatim record of what Jesus said. Like lots of writing, the authors have used his words to tell his story in their own way, and in doing so have often adapted them, sometimes leaving us with a picture of God that doesn't really fit with the God of love that Jesus proclaimed. The parable of the Wedding Feast in today's gospel is a good illustration.

John Fenton says that Matthew has put together two separate parables: the Invitations to the Wedding and the Wedding Garment. The first parable, the Invitations to the Wedding, hardly hangs together as a story. The invitations have been sent out in advance, and, in accordance with Jewish custom, when all is ready, the king sends his servants to summon the guests. The king's invitations are spurned. A second wave of servants is sent out with the same result. The king then sends his army to kill those who refuse to come and burn their city. A third wave of servants is then despatched to bring in all who can be found, good and bad alike, and the hall is filled with guests. All this happens while the banquet is ready and waiting!

Not only does the story not make sense – and on that basis alone it cannot be attributed to Jesus, it also paints the most atrocious picture of God, who, in the form of the king, not only kills those who reject him and takes reprisals on their city, but also, having compelled the good and bad from the streets to come to the banquet without giving

them time to get ready, binds the man without a wedding garment and has him cast into outer darkness.

The banquet was used by the prophets as a symbol of heaven, but the picture of the banquet in the parable is hardly heavenly. It is far removed from the picture painted by Isaiah: a feast of rich food and well-matured wines strained clear, prepared for all peoples. Death and destruction are not the way of the Lord; rather, death will be swallowed up for ever, and God will wipe away all our tears. (*Isaiah* 25.6-8)

So what are we to make of the parable? It seems that Jesus did tell a story about a feast, and it is instructive to compare Matthew's version with that of Luke, which is likely to be nearer to what Jesus actually said. Luke has none of the killing and destruction, nor the inhuman treatment of the man without a wedding garment; instead he places the emphasis on the contrast between the response of the guests originally invited and those who actually come.

Looked at in this way, there are clear parallels with the parable of the Vineyard which Matthew places immediately before the parable of the Wedding Feast. Just as the banquet is a symbol of heaven, so the vineyard is a symbol of Israel. The parable of the Vineyard is also found in the Gospel of Thomas, in what some scholars believe to be a more original, simpler, form. The owner of the vineyard sends his servants to receive the crop from the tenants, but the tenants treat them harshly, refusing to give them the fruit. He sends more servants with the same result. He then sends his son and heir, but the tenants kill him and take his inheritance for themselves. It is the story of Israel, with the same message as the parable of the Wedding Feast. In both there

are two waves of servants; they represent the two waves of prophets sent to call Israel back to the ways of God – the first in the eighth century BC and the second in the sixth century BC. Israel did not take their message to heart; everyday, worldly concerns – from buying oxen to getting married – get in the way. The message is that if God’s chosen people reject him, he will seek others who will follow him.

Jesus is holding up a mirror to the pious Jews of his day. Luke sets the story at a meal in the house of a Pharisee, and introduces it with a rather pious remark by one of the guests: ‘Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the Kingdom of God!’ Jesus tells the parable to show that the Kingdom is not some other-worldly prospect that awaits the conventionally pious – a heavenly reward for a respectable life – but a present reality calling for an immediate response. The guests around the table need to take to heart that it is those whom they, the respectable, religious Jews, regard as outcasts and sinners who will be found at the heavenly banquet rather than themselves.

Understood in this way, the parable has as a clear message for us as it did for the Pharisees gathered round the table with Jesus. How have we responded to the call of God? How do we see the Kingdom? – As something to look forward to in the life to come, or as something to build in this life?

Jesus’ answer was given in the Lord’s Prayer where he taught us to pray, ‘Your will be done, your kingdom come, *on earth as in heaven.*’ As the Christian Aid slogan puts it, ‘We believe in life before death.’ The Christian hope is not just for the life to come, but is very much for this life also, which I explore in my book *Light in the Darkness*. St Paul in his letter to the Philippians gives a lovely picture of the kingdom. It is a

way of living where differences are reconciled, in the same way that Paul urged Euodia and Syntache to be of the same mind in the Lord. It is a way of being where we experience the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, and where people pursue all that is true, honourable, just and pure (*Philippians 4.2, 7-8*). Isn't this what we hope for in this life? And if it is, then the whole of life should be lived as though we were striving to live in that way. And that, of course is the message of the parable of the Wedding Garment. The imagery is very strongly drawn in the idiom of Jesus' day, to make the message clear. The task of building the Kingdom is here and now, and all are called to be part of it. It is not enough to hear what Jesus taught and say 'Amen', like the pious Jews of his day; the real Amen is seen in the response and the action that follows.