

Trinity XVIII 2020 (Proper 23/OT 28)

Have you ever woken after something akin to a nightmare which involves a meal? Perhaps a situation like the scenario in *Abigail's Party* – Mike Lean's play about middle-class mores? So what are we to make of the parable that we have just heard? It sounds very much like the sort of party you really wouldn't want to attend under any circumstances, yet for many centuries it has been held up as an example of God's call to the Kingdom Life and our response to it. The standard interpretation represents the King as God, the son - Jesus, with all else following on from it: the troops - the Romans acting on God's behalf, the city burning - destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD, and so on. Yet when a story ends on such a negative note, can this be the only or best interpretation of the parable available to us? It seems to me to be very unsatisfactory that the speechless wedding guest ends up bound hand and foot, thrown into outer darkness. God is judge of all – yet one of infinite love. Ultimately, this interpretation of a story so full of violence seems to me to be implausible – it just doesn't fit the understanding of God we are led to by Jesus Christ, even when we know that he occasionally uses language to shock us out of complacency – something we see particularly in Matthew's Gospel.

It seems more likely to me that when Jesus talked of a king, people would have immediately thought of King Herod. The king in the parable certainly behaves as we would expect Herod to act. People would have remembered Herod bringing an army to Jerusalem and asking the people to accept him as king. Had the offer been accepted, Herod would have consummated the deal by marrying the granddaughter of the high priest – hence the wedding feast. However, the people of Jerusalem turned him down and Herod withdrew, coming back some time later with his army and storming the city. One of the descendents of the royal family gave himself up to quell a violent situation and he was carried off in chains and executed by the Romans in a particularly humiliating death.

Looking at the parable in this way, the curious scene of the man without a proper wedding garment makes sense as being the second part of the same parable and not a separate parable Matthew has seemingly tacked on. The king seems to be looking for a victim because, like many people holding power, he knows that the quickest way to unite a people is to focus on a victim. Moreover, this guest seems to be what we might call a nonviolent protestor – always a threat to those who hold real power.

To me the muteness of this guest suggests Jesus' silence before Pilate - something which Matthew emphasizes in his account of the Passion. The fate of the guest is the fate Jesus himself suffers, which had already been the fate of the royal victim of Herod's time. The Kingdom of Heaven, then, is not represented in this parable by a banquet, but could be the place where the victim has been cast out. Earlier in the Gospel Jesus, talking of the fate of John the Baptist says, *'From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent attack it.'* And so it does, as the many millions of Christians who are persecuted day by day bear witness to in this supposedly golden age of freedom in which we live, pandemic or no. Perhaps then, this place of outer darkness is the real world. After all, Jesus consorted with all the wrong sorts of people: women, tax collectors, adulterers, prostitutes, children, together with all those suffering from exclusion, living of

the edge of society. Thus, the hidebound regulation enforced by both the Romans and the religious authorities at the time of Jesus is rocked by the consorting of a carpenter from Nazareth with all the wrong sorts of people!

This past week has seen the shameful conclusions of that part of The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse which deals with the Church of England. Whilst it may be true that the number of abusers is small when compared to the huge number of clergy and lay people who tried to do their best for the Kingdom over the many decades which were covered, the damage to innocent children and young people is something which should make us all weep. Any institution will contain 'bad apples,' yet the moral foundation of the Institutional Church has, I hope, been shaken to the core by the miserable inadequacies, the disfunction of senior clerics not listening to each other, and the turpitude displayed by inadequately listening to victims and survivors. All this has been laid bare. Where do we go?

Well, I do believe that the Church has made progress – this diocese in particular. But what we should all remember is that every one of us is part of the Body of Christ. We each have a responsibility in our own individual roles as a priesthood of believers in doing our absolute best to enable all to participate in the Kingdom Life safely, without fear or favour. It's a wake-up call to never put people on a pedestal regardless of who they are, and to know that we each bring something vital to the Church. We all have our own gifts.

That wonderful passage from Isaiah talks of a wondrous feast of rich food and well-matured wines strained clear. This is imagery which we can take and find fulfilment in, because the Kingdom banquet is open to all people. The real Messianic Banquet in the Gospels is represented by the Feeding of the Five Thousand in the Wilderness – **all** are welcome. There is no political force exerted in the invitation and nobody gets ejected if they aren't properly dressed. This feast in the Wilderness, away from the centres of worldly power, shows up the king's banquet in the parable for what it is. Instead of an offer we cannot refuse, we are offered something that we would never wish to refuse.

The passage from Philippians captures the way we are called to live in the knowledge of the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we all regarded each other as a joy and crown, as Paul does his friends in Philippi? Even Euodia and Syntyche, two women who have tirelessly helped Paul in proclaiming the Good News, are reminded gently to get on with each other and to see the bigger picture! Regardless of who we are; regardless of status, gender, race or colour; no matter how broken or unworthy we may feel; no matter if we come fully convinced or full of doubt; Paul calls us to say to each other, 'Rejoice in the Lord always: and again, I say rejoice.'

These words lead us back to the eternal banquet. As we gather around the table either here in church or at home online - doing what Paul and his friends did - we have a foretaste of our ultimate destiny of unity with God – the ultimate place of safety - made known through the gifts of the earth – the bread and wine – which we offer and then receive back as the gift of Jesus Christ himself. In this is ultimate joy and peace, our own gift to a broken world, our treasure to proclaim, as Teresa of Ávila said:

“Let nothing disturb you,
Let nothing frighten you,
God never changes.
Patience obtains all things.
Whoever has God lacks nothing;
God alone suffices.”



The Wedding at Cana - Paolo Veronese 1563 Louvre Museum, Paris

Isaiah 25: 1-9

O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the palace of aliens is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt. Therefore strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you.

For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat. When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm, the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place, you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds; the song of the ruthless was stilled. On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured 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 for ever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Philippians 4: 1-9

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the

gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. 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 honourable, 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,

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, maltreated 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.'