

## **Sermon – Sunday October 11<sup>th</sup> 2020**

### **Matthew 22:1-14 The parable of the wedding banquet**

Do you ever find that something happens that is completely unexpected but it changes how you perceive the world?

When I was a singing teacher working in Leeds, it was coming up to Christmas, it had been a long term, I had just put quite a lot of children through exams and now we were into the endless Christmas concert season and of course I was ill with a cough, sore throat and just looked atrocious... I used to work all across the city so travelled by train... I was sat at a station probably looking awful when a man who was homeless came up to me and said hi, I was expecting to be asked for money but instead he said you look awful.... I have bought you a cup of tea....

There is something about what happens when our expectations are broken and we see our prejudgements and assumptions come tumbling down around us... I did not accept the cup of tea and offered it back to him, and we talked until my train arrived.

And here we are another, Parable from the Gospel of Matthew, every week we are learning Jesus' stories are not meant to be comforting bedtime stories; his parables are designed to tell us things we do not want to hear and to show us things we don't want to see.

This parable is no exception but I argue it is the hardest, to understand so today I am going to offer an interpretation which is not traditional and will push against the grain because the purpose of these parables is to make us uncomfortable. In this week's parable of a wedding banquet gone awry. Jesus makes zero effort to soften its jagged edges; it is a harsh story, steeped in violence, revenge and destruction. Let us take different angles to this text and see if we can piece together where we fit and where God is in such a violent tale.

Jesus says; "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son... Jesus he uses the analogy of a king, king is a term that we understand to be synonymous with God and we automatically assume God takes the king role in a parable about the kingdom of heaven. But is that right? The king has prepared a banquet for us all in heaven. That fits with our understanding of the kingdom, so far so good...

However, when the banquet is refused, when those who are invited will not go, when they sin against the king by murdering and harming his servants.... what does the king do then...In rage and fury he lays waste to the city....

What about the guests? Who are those who turn down their invitation?

Throughout modern history Christians have attempted to soften this brutal story. Most often, we've done so by making the parable into allegory. An allegory about the difference between the Jews and Gentiles suggesting that the Jews rejected God's salvation offered by God and the gentiles, us, have accepted our invitation. This suddenly look like a remarkable comfortable parable where we are all safe and sound having done the right thing...

But this understanding of this parable this disregards Jesus 'own heritage, it disregards the fact that Jesus was a Jew and a Pharisee, and that all of the people of Israel are loved and cherished by the Lord. Even worse still this suggests that God does not fulfil his promises that God does not uphold his covenant and that God is not faithful to his children. And we know that that is never true.

The development of this allegory, has been used as an anti-Semitic weapon it has been used as a means of oppression it has been used as a means of perceiving ourselves as Christians to be better to be more loved and well cared for by our creator. Scripture tells us this is not true. This is a heresy.

So the invited guests do not attend. Who are the guests that do come?

Those at a party when their city is burning down, when they are potentially losing all they know. There they are drinking, eating and probably putting on a show of having fun out of fear of what could happen to them, if they do not. A tyrannical king who places little value on life is always someone to fear.

And again he shows his colours, In all the false merriment, the king notices a man, a man who does not dress like he is going to a wedding, a man who does not look like he belongs, a man who is on the outer edges of this society. All the false merriment is put on hold,. The king accosts him for not looking like he belongs. But the man remains speechless and tells his servants to throw him out into outer darkness....

As Christ's followers, do we really believe in a God as petty, vengeful, hotheaded, and thin-skinned as the king in this parable? A God who burns an entire city to the ground in order to appease his wounded ego? A God who forces people to celebrate his son's marriage while his armies wreak destruction right outside? A God who casts an unexpected guest into the "outer darkness"?

This does not sound like the God who walks to the cross willingly, the God who lays down his life for our sins? The God who even when rejected by those he came to save still loved? What if the king in the parable isn't God at all? What if the king is what we project onto God? What if the king is an image of everything we have learnt about power and authority from watching other, very

human kings and rulers? Kings like Herod. Conquerors like the Roman Empire of Jesus's day, leaders throughout history and even now... who use their power to control and oppress...

So who is the God figure in this parable? Is it possible that the "God" figure in the parable is the one guest who refuses to accept the demands of the king? The guest who decides not to "wear the robe" of fake celebration, the one guest whose silence brings the whole fake feast to a halt? The guest who decides he'd rather be "bound hand and foot," and cast into the outer darkness, like Gethsemane, Calvary, the cross, and the grave,

He would rather do that than accept the authority of a violent, loveless sovereign?

Does this not sound remarkably like the God who says to his disciples... For I was hungry and you gave Me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, I was naked and you did not clothe Me, I was sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.'

Does this not sound more like the Jesus we have come to know? So if God is found in the unexpected? In the people we often choose not to see, because they appear different to us, those who we cross the street to avoid, those who we would prefer we not in our church? If God is there? What are we to take from this....

What would have to be different for us, right here right now if Jesus was the unrobed guest and not the king in this story? What would we have to change our lives to welcome such a guest? To honour such a guest? To accompany such a guest? What robes of privilege, power, wealth, empire, location, and complicity would we have to refuse to wear even when if it were to cost us a spot in the palace?

I'll end with a prayer, I pray we refuse sham banquets, that we reject the invitations of heartless kings so that we, like Christ the unrobed guest, thwart the oppressors of God's children, so they maybe be rendered the speechless in his name and may we all look for God in the unexpected and not be too surprised to find him there.