

## Trinity XVIII Year A 2017

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? Or perhaps you have yourself attended a meal which you would rather not have been at, or which was marred by some faux pas on your part or someone else in some way. I well remember attending a lunch many years ago in Hove Vicarage (where I was very much on my best behaviour – new organist's post, new vicar, new curates) when I was offered a second helping of the delicious boeuf bourguignon. I bit into what I thought was a juicy piece of meat but which turned out to be a muslin bouquet garni! The taste of those herbs remained with me (unpleasantly) for the next week, and then there was the embarrassment of tastefully removing the said bouquet-garni! Ann, the vicar's wife, still dines out on the story – as it were!

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 together with our response to it. The standard interpretation represents the King as God, the son as 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 unsatisfactory that the speechless wedding guest ends up bound hand and foot, thrown into outer darkness. Whilst, I do absolutely believe that God is our judge – yet a judge with infinite love. And ultimately, we do have the gift of free-will in which we may turn away from that love. Yet as I say, this interpretation of a story so full of violence seems to me to be implausible – it just doesn't fit in with the face of Jesus Christ we see, 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 down the offer, and Herod withdrew, coming back some time later with his army and storming the city. One of the descendants 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.

In this I think that it is possible to see that the guests who were churlish at the invitation represent those who went home when Herod came calling and hoped everything would blow over and they could get on with business as usual. The other invited guests represent those who resisted Herod with violence. Both groups of guests are met with violent

reprisals from the king in the parable. The rounding up of guests to replace the first group ends up not an act of charity for the poor and dispossessed but a forced gathering of whoever the king's slaves could find.

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. Those in power do not like people who resist in a peaceful way. There may be some parallel there with the story which we have been seeing and listening to all week from the mad world of Hollywood!

The silence of this guest suggests Jesus' silence before Pilate - something which Matthew emphasizes in his account of the Passion. The fate of this 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 as the place of the victim who is 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 witness of many millions of Christians who are persecuted day by day in this supposedly golden age in which we live.

This leaves us with the question of banquets and the like. 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 fulfillment in, because the banquet is one open to all people. Isaiah uses language later to prove such an inspiration to St John the Divine when he composed the Book of Revelation. There is ultimately a sense of transformation for humanity, not just in the way we interact with each other, but in the transformation of a New Earth and heaven brought about by Salvation made known in Jesus Christ - the Lamb upon the throne. The *real* image of the Messianic Banquet in the Gospels is the feeding of the five thousand in the wilderness – the generous feeding to all comers with no reprisals for anybody who happens to stay away. There is no political force exerted in the invitation and nobody gets ejected if they aren't properly dressed. The poor as well as the rich are invited right from the start. The banquet offered by Jesus in the wilderness, away from the centers 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 given an offer 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, and is at the heart of Paul's message. 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 I spoke of earlier. As we gather around the table - doing what Paul and his friends did - we have a foretaste of our ultimate destiny of unity with God, 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.

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

— *Teresa of Ávila*  
Amen.

**Collect:** Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us your gift of faith that, forsaking what lies behind and reaching out to that which is before, we may run the way of your commandments and win the crown of everlasting joy; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

#### **Isaiah 25: 1-8**

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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Therefore strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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**

<sup>4</sup> <sup>1</sup> Therefore, my brothers and sisters, <sup>[a]</sup> whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

<sup>2</sup> I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. <sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Rejoice <sup>[c]</sup> in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>[d]</sup> <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

<sup>6</sup> Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

<sup>8</sup> Finally, beloved, <sup>[e]</sup> 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 <sup>[f]</sup> these things. <sup>9</sup> 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.

#### **Matthew 22:1-14**

<sup>22</sup> Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: <sup>2</sup> 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. <sup>3</sup> He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. <sup>4</sup> 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." <sup>5</sup> But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, <sup>6</sup> while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. <sup>7</sup> The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. <sup>8</sup> Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. <sup>9</sup> Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." <sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> 'But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, <sup>12</sup> and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. <sup>13</sup> 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." <sup>14</sup> For many are called, but few are chosen.'