

MANY ARE CALLED - ALL OF US ARE CALLED

Evensong Harvest - All Saints Rothbury - 12 October 2008

'For many are called, but few are chosen'." This is a really gracious call of God to all of us. Whether we are chosen depends on whether WE accept the call.

Our second reading (which is the Gospel for the morning of trinity 21) gives us the third of three parables: (the two sons Matthew 21:28-32; the tenants in the vineyard Matthew 21:33-46; and the wedding banquet Matthew 22:1-14). All three have images of father and a son or sons. The first two also have the image of a vineyard. The last two have the sending of servants, the murder of servants, and the punishment of the murderers. In each case, there is a distinction between those who do the will of the father/landlord/king and those who don't.

These parables challenged the legitimacy of the Jewish leadership. At the time Jesus was speaking, the Pharisees and other members of the civil and religious hierarchy would have been insulted. The way they are placed in the gospel narrative shows Matthew's understanding that the true Israel is now the church, and that the claims of the Pharisees are false and those of the church true.

Matthew cannot avoid writing his gospel with the circumstances of his present time in mind. The Jews were expelling the Hebrew Christians from the synagogues in an attempt to strengthen the failing and divided Judaism. The parables of the two sons, the wicked tenants, and the king who gave a marriage feast make a progression from John the Baptist to the rejection of Jesus and punishment of those who rejected him through the final judgement, when those without a wedding garment will be cast out.

The generosity and open love of God is clearly seen in all three of these parables. Tax collectors and prostitutes go into the kingdom before the chief priests and elders because they witnessed the ministry of John the Baptist and believed, and repented. In other words, they accepted the call. Other nations (Gentiles) are offered the kingdom of heaven because the tenants of the vineyard (the leaders of Israel) killed

the son. People in the thoroughfares of the city are invited into the kingdom feast because those who were **first** invited were not worthy nor did they accept the call.

In our parable this evening, the wedding feast of the king's son is a celebration with obviously major political resonances. Immediately following the parable is the question about paying taxes to Caesar which is clearly a political question too.

The attendance of the great men of the kingdom at the wedding feast of the king's son would be expected not only as a necessary expression of the honour they owe the king, but also as an expression of their loyalty to his legitimate successor. It is always wise to keep in with the royal family. Political allegiance is at stake. Excuses would hardly be acceptable, and the invitees offer none. To refuse the invitation is tantamount to rebellion. It's not a situation where they **can't** come. They just don't want to. In refusing it, the invitees are deliberately treating the king's authority with contempt. They know full well that their behaviour will be understood as insurrection. This is what they intend, and those who kill the king's messengers only make this intention known more emphatically. The king responds, as kings do, to insurrection, and goes into destructive mode. Could this be an allusion to the destruction of the temple in 70, which is interpreted to be a sign of God's judgment against the unbelieving Jews? As I have already said, several times in Matthew, HIS present seeps into the past era which he is describing.

The political reading of the parable isn't the only possibility. If you don't go along with it, then look at it this way: in Jesus' story, the invitation to come to the wedding got in the way of the invitees' own pursuits. They want to do what they want to do when they want to do it. One goes to his field and another to his business. These aren't so much excuses as personal concerns, that they think are more important than the king's invitation to this most important celebration for his son. The relevance to our very full 21st century lifestyle is obvious. So often there is so much that gets between folk and God.

So, there are refusals. Why are other guests be invited when those

originally invited have refused? Hospitality and honour demands that the banquet hall be full. But is Jesus making some oblique reference to the necessity of having full churches, or is it all about the need for constant evangelism?

The first part of the parable has some strong connections with our worship services. It is surely God that invites us there. Aren't we also the Lord's servants who are told to go to tell the invitees (the whole world?) that everything is ready? Remember the Great Commission: Go out into all the world and preach the gospel! It is a present continuous imperative command - continue to go until the hall is filled! Until our naves are filled, can we ever think that we can stop going out to streets to gather in both the good and bad? And surely in the Eucharist there is a celebration, where we partake in a symbolic "wedding feast" - or at least a foretaste of the great feast that is coming? Are some people absent because they have other "pressing" business that they think is more important? Doesn't this sound like a story of the church? Look at the poor take up of the invitations to the 'back to church' Sunday.

The last bit of the story may have been an addition - and many people have difficulty with this business of the wedding garment, and the subsequent apparently harsh and unfair judgement. Wearing festal garments indicated one's participation in the joy of the feast. To appear in ordinary, dirty and stained working clothes would show contempt for the occasion, and a refusal fully to join in the king's rejoicing. Though this would be serious at any royal banquet, it certainly cannot be tolerated at the marriage of his son. Once again, this is no ordinary act of dishonour to a host it is a matter of political significance.

One commentator says that for any such occasion guests would be expected to wear clothes that were both longer than those worn by ordinary people on working days and also newly washed. Those who could afford it would wear white, but it was sufficient for ordinary people to wear as near to white as washing their poorer quality clothes could achieve. Poor people, who might own only one patched tunic and cloak each, would often borrow clothes for occasions such as weddings

or religious festivals.

'Come now, the feast is ready' means that the lengthy preparations for the feast are sufficiently far advanced that the guests should now be on their way. Wedding festivities lasted a week, and not all guests would arrive at the beginning. So, even if invited on the street, there is no reason to suppose that, once invited, these people have no time to go home, to change their clothes, and to borrow clothes from their neighbours, if necessary.

I take this tail end of the parable to mean that the man who accepts the invitation but, by turning up in his everyday, dirty clothes, shows only contempt for the **purpose** of the occasion, and is no more worthy than those who rejected the invitation. *They* spurned the invitation to the feast; *he* shows contempt of the occasion, while actually attending the feast to get a free meal. The invitation is not just to be physically present at the feast, but to participate in the king's rejoicing over the marriage of his son. The man without the wedding garment turns out to be one of the 'bad' who were invited along with the 'good.' Both good and bad are genuinely invited. All are called, whether or not we are worthy. Being either good or bad is not the qualification for being a guest. All that is required is willingness to honour the occasion, to rejoice with the king, to be a real guest at the wedding. This is what wearing a wedding garment expresses.

But the point of the parable is that showing a disinterested acknowledgement of God's goodness is not enough. We also need to acknowledge the supreme authority of God. He is the great "I am who I will be", the creator and lord of the universe. Our acknowledgment of this surely finds expression in an attitude (like the wearing a wedding garment) that is different from the attitude of simply acknowledging his goodness. There must be a full-hearted commitment when we answer God's gracious call, not just a dry and routine performance of dead religiosity. Jesus teaches here, I believe, that unless we really do acknowledge God's authority and honour him as the mainspring of our life and our actions, we cannot participate in the kingdom now or in the future.

Jesus is not saying that you must wear your Sunday best to go to church. Rather, I think it is the inner you and the inner me which should wear the garments of salvation - cleanliness and purity. In many modern baptismal rites, a new white robe is put on the infant, symbolising this. And of course, in the early church, where baptism was often done in flowing rivers, a new clean dry robe was provided for the new member of the church of God. Often Paul speaks of "putting on" the new life in terms of clothing. And the psalms are full of the image of 'putting on' a new robe of righteousness.

So, this evening we see an apparent paradox. Jesus says that God's invitation to the banquet with no strings attached is **free** but he also points out God's requirement of "**putting on**" **something appropriate** to that calling. Both sides of the paradox are individually true. We have to learn to live with the tension of the teaching.

Earlier in Matthew 7 Jesus says: Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. At first sight this appears to contradict what Jesus is saying. But it doesn't really. For all those who say Lord, Lord: (and the emphasis is on the 'saying' - on the talking a good talk) are those who have not *fully* responded to the gracious and free invitation. One of the signs that the invitation has been accepted in full is the wearing of the clean wedding garment - that is: doing the will of the Father.

In Matthew there is another strand of teaching which could be summed up as a critique of those in the early Christian community who do not bear fruit, who do not fully accept God's authority and the need to do his will as part of the acceptance of the invitation. I think that Matthew probably added this verse as his own summary of the situation in his church. These parables are prophetic statements meant to lead to self-examination about smugness and laziness at being on the inside. We might say that God doesn't want us to just wallow in divine grace. God expects more from us. And throughout Matthew there have been references to those whom we might call nominal believers.

So, how to sum up. Today's society seems to think of heaven in terms

of an ethereal realm of placid angels, gentle harps and floating clouds. Jesus describes it as more like a wedding party to which we are invited. How do we respond to the vitality, and joy of the kingdom of heaven? Do we look forward to the fullness of the Son's reign? The king generously invites us into his kingdom. How will we respond? Are we preoccupied with our business in this world or resentful of God's call upon our personal lives, and the time and more importantly the effort involved? Or are we ready to receive his open-hearted welcome?

And if we have joined the party to honour the Son, are we grateful guests? It can be easy to forget that we enter the kingdom through Christ's merits alone. We are also called, as citizens of heaven, to continue to submit our whole lives to Jesus as Lord, day by day: we may enter the kingdom through grace, but we cannot demand to stay there on our own terms.

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