

Reflection for Pentecost 19 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

“For many are invited, but few are chosen.” Jesus’ words at the end of the parable of the Wedding Banquet.

Being a priest for over twenty-five years I have had many a conversation with couples who are looking to get married. One issue that tends to come up is how many people can they invite. How many will the church hold? (Not a problem in the current Covid pandemic where in Scotland the limit is 20.)

“We are only going to have a small wedding”, the conversation often starts, but as they look at the list, as parents start to make helpful suggestions, the list often grows longer and longer. The balance between cost, space, and the desire to have as many as family and friends as possible present.

Who is invited and who accepts lies at the heart of Jesus’ parable - a parable that has a sharp edge to it.

In this section of his gospel, as we approach Jesus’ passion, Matthew records Jesus speaking to and about the religious leaders of his day. He is highlighting their lack of integrity and tells them plainly, almost openly, that they have no part in the Kingdom of God, because they had the invitation, but they rejected it.

In the parable we see pictured a generous king who puts on a great wedding feast for his son and, following eastern custom of the time, sends out his servants at the time of the wedding feast to let those who have been invited that the moment has arrived it is time for them to be in attendance. Rather than leaving everything and attending they refuse to come. But unwilling to accept the negative response the king sends out a second group of servants *‘Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.’* The response the second time is even worse, they pay no attention and go off—one to his field, another to his business. The rest seize his servants, ill-treat them and kill them.

This opening section provides a sad illustration of the way in which God repeatedly invites those he is calling to hear his message and to respond positively. Look at the pages of scripture you see it time and again God’s call coming through the prophets and ultimately through Christ himself. But so often that invitation is met not with warmth but the total opposite, ignored or even rejected.

The king however does not call off the banquet, rather he looks elsewhere for those will attend. He sends his servants out onto the street corners, the highways. The invitations go out to all and sundry. For Matthew as he writes his gospel primarily for a Jewish Christian community, this is a clear explanation as to the changing nature of the church as it grows - why so many gentiles are now becoming part of the worshipping community.

God’s love and grace not kept for a few but there offered to all.

There is a third element to the parable. The wedding venue is now full of guests. Not just the feast but also the festal robes are provided by the King. In this way nobody feels

ashamed of the rags they call clothes or, conversely, they cannot show off in pride their new wedding outfit. All are equal before the King, all come to the wedding banquet on equal terms - another important element of the Christian message. **It does not matter who we are or where we come from or our stature in the sight of this world. All are equal in the sight of God.**

But as the King is walking around he notices one guest who is not in the robes he had provided. He obviously thought his own clothes were good enough. The King is having none of it, and he is thrown out. *'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'*

We may well consider this punishment to be excessive for wearing the wrong clothes, but that misses the point. The man considered his best to be good enough for the King and he was scorning the King's provision. The king says No. At times we may be tempted to think the same - our best is good enough for God - we can earn our way into heaven.

God says **NO**

Isaiah 64:6 sums this up.

All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.

Or as one writer puts it: - *"That is the human predicament : we are literally not fit to be seen before God, let alone enjoy the feast of his kingdom"*

It is only clothed with his love and grace that we can enjoy the feast.

To quote from Isaiah again (61:10)

I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God.

For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness,"

The parable's message is clear.

God has provided the feast of the Kingdom. It is the wedding feast of his Son.

The invitation to the feast goes out far and wide. Some will accept other reject it; and amongst those who reject the invitation may well be those whom we would have thought would have accepted. The invitation is not made once but made on numerous occasions; but if it is rejected the party is missed.

If you think you can rely on your own fitness to be part of that banquet, you are mistaken, it is only as you are clothed by God that we can enter and take part.

There are two sides of coming to faith - God's call, God's invitation, the universalistic nature of the gospel message but also our need to respond, to say yes, to attend, and do so clothed by God.

We as a church and as individuals who have heard and responded to God's invitation are now called to be the servants taking out that invitation to others. The responses we get will be mixed and we should not be surprised at that.

"For many are invited, but few are chosen."