

St Mary's, Dorchester, Sunday 11th October 2026 i.e. 19th Sunday after Trinity [Proper 23].

Isaiah 25:1-9

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Yesterday I was at Hilfield Friary again for their lunchtime Mass. I was talking with some friends afterwards, and I mentioned that I was heading home to write my sermon for today. And one of my friends – a priest – said, “Ah, the parable of the wedding banquet.” My other friend breezily said how easy they thought it would be to write a sermon about that parable; and the first friend said, “No, it’s not the nice version from Luke’s Gospel; it’s the other one.”

In fairness, today’s parable from Matthew’s Gospel is very similar to one that’s told in Luke’s Gospel [14:15-24]. I preached on that other parable when we were reading Luke last year. There, Jesus is having dinner in the house of a leader of the Pharisees [Luke 14:1], and that setting prompts him to tell several dinner-related parables. Each of those is about the way God upsets the normal order of things. Jesus then goes on to tell something like this parable – in which the people who are originally invited to a feast are replaced by complete strangers – the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. In that context, the message is clear:

...some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last. [Luke 13:30]

For all its similarities, the parable we heard today is very different. The interpretation is a lot less clear, and the bits that are clear are unsettling. So why is this version of the parable so much darker than the other one, and what need is being served by that darkness?

When something in the Bible is difficult to understand, it helps to notice what has come before, and what is about to happen afterwards. In Luke’s Gospel Jesus tells the nicer version of this parable in the middle of his ministry. For several chapters he has been on a long, winding journey to Jerusalem, stopping and teaching on the way. He accepts dinner invitations and enjoys watching how the other guests are behaving. There is some tension, but everything feels a lot more leisurely.

When this parable comes up in Matthew's Gospel the atmosphere is very different. In Matthew's account Jesus has already arrived in Jerusalem [Matthew 21:1-11]. Soon after arriving he hits the Temple pretty hard, turning over the stalls of the businesspeople who exploit pilgrims for a living [21:12-17]. He gives a lot of people good reason to be angry at him, but others respond with glee.

The tension ramps up. In the Temple each day, in one conversation after another, Jesus provokes more controversy. Some of the Jewish leaders question his authority to do what he does [21:23-28]; he tells a parable about a man who had two sons, one who was obedient and one who was not [21:28-32]; he tells another parable about some wicked tenants whose tenancy will be taken away and given to others who will do as the landowner asks [21:33-46]... It's a bit too generous to say that there's a subtext to all of this: just like the Hebrew prophets of old, Jesus is calling his fellow Jews to repent. He's also saying, not so subtly, that if they don't repent God will replace them with other people who will be truly faithful. This situation is so fraught that in the very next chapter Jesus will start openly denouncing the Pharisees – his own natural allies [23:1-36]. And soon after that the Temple authorities will start plotting to kill him [26:1-5]. From there things only go downhill.

That context explains why there is so much more violence in this parable than there might have been otherwise; but it doesn't explain why the Gospel writers thought we needed to hear it. I'd like to offer you my thought, and in the process I'll try to explain the most unsettling part of the parable, the eviction of the man without a wedding garment [22:13].

Over the last two-thousand years Christians have shown a worrying tendency to hear Jesus' parables in a simplistic way. If I'm determined I can read the parables in a way that gives me and my tribe easy reassurance, and which also gives me ammunition to use against anyone I don't like that day. In the early Christian centuries parables like this one fuelled Christian anti-Semitism – what better excuse to persecute Jews than the belief that God has abandoned them and destroyed their city because they are so wicked? Without much effort I can use parables like this to support my other religious prejudices too: maybe I don't like Roman Catholics, or other Anglicans, or secularists... Put any group you don't like in the place of the undeserving elite, and your own group can be the new best thing. This temptation is so well established there's even a fancy theological word for it: it's called "supersessionism". That temptation is an abuse of Jesus' message, of course, but it hasn't stopped Christians trying it.

This parable is not just about one group superseding another. After all, Jesus' final comment is that

...many are called, but few are chosen. [Matthew 22:14]

Which rather cuts both ways. As evidence I offer you the man without a wedding garment. We've already been told, rather ominously, that the king's servants have gathered a group of people who are "both good and bad" [22:10]. The king doesn't seem to mind; he just wants the hall to be filled. But it turns out that there are still conditions for being here – or something like conditions. Some scholars say that it was normal practice for the hosts of parties like this to give out wedding garments, so you really have to be trying not to be dressed appropriately. Whether that's true or not, the man without a wedding garment looks like a picture of complacency: surely by now he knows the reputation of his host; yet here he is speechless.

Like this wedding feast, the Church is always going to be a mixed body of people, "both good and bad". On one level Jesus doesn't seem to mind: during his earthly ministry he got a reputation for hanging around with undesirables; and he still draws people from all backgrounds into his Church, which is rightly described as a hospital for sinners rather than a museum for saints. But that isn't quite the same thing as saying that you can behave how you like as a Christian. Paul addresses this question repeatedly in his letters.

Should we continue in sin so that grace may abound? By no means! [Romans 6:1, etc.]

There is a proper way of being a Christian. Just as, perhaps, there is a proper way of being a guest at a wedding feast. I'm pretty sure it has something to do with joy, which is a fruit of the Spirit and which enjoys an organic relationship with all sorts of other good habits [Galatians 5:22-26].

When we accept the invitation to the Wedding Feast we are opening ourselves up to change and growth. There is something profoundly self-defeating about coming to the Feast and resisting the transformation God offers us. "How can we who died to sin go on living in it?" [Romans 6:2]

Or to quote our Epistle this morning:

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. [Philippians 4:8]

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.