

Sermon for Sunday 11.10.26

- Readings: Philippians 4:1-9 and *Matthew 22:1-14*

When visitors from Western countries first experience the Middle East, they are often struck by the hospitality they receive. I remember being quite taken aback by the generous hospitality I experienced during an evening meal hosted by the Bedouin people when I was on a pilgrimage in the Holy Land many years ago. As my fellow pilgrims and I ate more and more food seemed to be delivered to the table, far more than we could eat. But there was a balance to be had, because none of us wanted to leave too much unfinished food and cause offence.

Every culture has its traditions of hospitality, but in the Middle East the relationship between host and guest is intensely important; and a great deal hangs upon it.

So, it seems natural then that we hear Jesus, who was himself Middle Eastern man, tell a story of hospitality, likening God to a king who has prepared a banquet for his son's wedding.

The invitations would have been sent out to all the local dignitaries, and now, on the day of the banquet, when the meat is just about ready, the king sends servants to summon those who had accepted the invitation. But they all refuse to come. So, the humiliated king sends his servants out again. But the guests snub him again, mistreating and even murdering his servants.

It's a bizarre story in some ways and in the end the king takes an amazing decision: the party must go ahead, so if the VIPs won't come, let them be punished, but bring in anybody who'd like a meal.

If this story was set today, then we might imagine the king sending out minibuses which return with whoever can be found on the streets: those simply going about their business but also the who probably don't feel worthy, asylum seekers or refugees, bored teenagers, the homeless, sex workers, drug addicts, street drinkers, or shoplifters. Not the normal guest list for a royal banquet – but they are all brought in, and finally the marquee is full.

Those hearing Jesus would not have missed his point. The theologian the late William Barclay reminds us that the rabbinic teachers of Jesus' own day already told stories which involved Kings inviting people to feasts. Such stories were well known to Jesus' listeners. But in retelling well known stories Jesus was making bold claims. In this parable about the kingdom of heaven, the king is God, and the dignitaries who snub him are Israel's religious leaders.

By rejecting Jesus, they are rejecting the God who sent him and so bringing judgement upon themselves; in their place those who are seen as outcasts are summoned to God's banquet and are entering the kingdom.

To host a party that goes well is a wonderful feeling, but a party that goes badly is a nightmare. So, when we are expecting guests, most of us feel at least a little nervous. Providing hospitality can make us vulnerable; there is a risk we will be embarrassed if it all goes wrong. And it's like that with the hospitality that God shows us through Jesus. By inviting us to his banquet, where we can enjoy the abundance of his love, God risks our rejection.

It is in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, that we see the full extent of the vulnerability of this hospitable God.

But if this story in Matthew's gospel tells us about what God is like, it also teaches us something about how we might respond to him.

The royal invitation comes with an RSVP, and whereas other invitations can be declined or accepted without huge implications, how we respond to this one shapes who we are and who we can become. Saying “yes” to God is at the very heart of the Christian life, and as people of faith this “yes” needs constant renewing. God’s Invitation and our response are dramatized in our celebration of Holy Communion: week by week, God’s love welcome us, and we say our “yes” when we share in the bread and wine of the Eucharist.

As I draw to a close this morning, I just want to say something about what seems to be a rather harsh conclusion to the parable, where one of the guests is thrown out into the darkness for not wearing the right clothes.

At first, we may think that there is a real tension between what feels like exclusion when the parable seems at first to be about inclusion.

But sometimes I don't think we should always take the details of Jesus' parables too far; because often they make one big point. In the parable of the wedding banquet that point uses the metaphor of putting on the right clothes. For Christians, those who accept God's invitation we are to make the daily decision to follow Jesus, to figuratively put on his values and teachings just as we put on our clothes. It's a reminder that we need to have Jesus as our model and our focus.

This too, is part of our "yes" to God: and so well expressed in the words of the congregational prayer that we sometimes say after the Eucharist at our 10am service, "may we who share Christ's body live his risen life".

Accepting God's invitation to us can seem tough, but as St Paul reminded us in our first reading not only is the Lord near, but if we keep on doing the things that we have learnt, received and heard, as we explore our faith, the peace of God will be with us. AMEN