

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 28 Year A 2020

There are many ways to approach and understand the life and ministry of Jesus. It is one of the great gifts of the gospels, that they allow us to approach our Lord from many angles. There are many 'entry points' to get closer and know our Lord better. Even a very casual reading of the Gospels will show that one of these angles, one of these 'entry points', is of Jesus at table. And, so often, tables of celebration. We might note the first meal recorded in which we find Jesus at the wedding at Cana. And at the end of his earthly life his last meal with his friends in the religiously charged and highly significant celebration of the Passover. After the resurrection, Jesus restores his relationship with Peter over a simple meal of BBQ fish on seashore. We find that part of Jesus' notoriety was his indiscriminate association at table with the most disreputable of people, whether Zacchaeus, or the woman who anointed Jesus with her hair. 'He eats with sinners and tax collectors' becomes one of the gossipy charges against our Lord. And these shared meals, even if casual and ordinary meals, *became* celebratory because of the way Jesus restored dignity and hope to people who had otherwise lost dignity and hope.

Not only does the image of the banquet, find its way into Jesus own life. He works it into one of the enduring images of the Kingdom of God. As the gospels present it to us, the Kingdom is the place of celebration, a place of inclusivity and welcome. The heavenly banquet is described as a wedding banquet. In the book of Revelation, the Church, the bride of Christ realises its destiny in the marriage feast of the Lamb. And so, the heavenly banquet is held up to us as an image of *hope*. We taste something of it here on earth, yet it is not yet fully realised. We've received the invitation, but we haven't yet sat down at table. There is much to be done between now and then.

If we listen carefully to the various prayers of mass, so often they pick up on these ideas: the idea that what we do here each week, and indeed each day, anticipates the eternal banquet of heaven. That's why our celebration of the Eucharist is so important, is so central to what we do as Christians. What we share in *now* looks forward to what will be ours *for eternity*.

And that's a good perspective to have. It's good to be reminded that we do not yet have the full picture, that we do not yet enjoy and possess all that God seeks to give. This should keep us on our toes, a little edgy. It should help us look beyond, not allowing ourselves to become too settled, too stale and too predictable. Because otherwise *we'll miss* the important work we need to do. We will fail to read the signs of the times. We will be enclosed and insular and forget the imperative to proclaim the good news afresh to each generation.

The gospel portion placed before us today, of course, picks up on this important image of the banquet. But the parable has a couple of stings in the tail. The first we have probably now have become quite familiar with as we have made our journey with Matthew through his Gospel this whole year. We have heard how the specific crisis Matthew responds to in his Gospel is how to address the separation between church and synagogue. More specifically how the church will establish a distinct identity beyond Israel. And we see it also in the idea, as we did last week, that the gift so wonderfully and generously offered can be rejected. Last week, that rejection seen in the servants of the king and even the son of the king, murdered in the vineyard. Today, the invitation to share in the wedding banquet. It is likely that the evangelist has in mind here the two directions this rejection can take. Last week, the inheritors of the covenant rejecting God's new revelation in Jesus Christ. And today's gospel suggesting the rejection experienced by the first Christian missionaries. Those who have gone out to proclaim, that 'all is ready' only to have their message dismissed. And so, as the parable suggests, the missionary thrust of the church *must continue*. It must look elsewhere, in the words of the gospel, *out to the roads, to collect everyone they could find*. At the end of the Gospel Jesus reminds his disciples to carry his good news to *all nations*.

And this brings us to the second sting in the tale: the tricky bit about the person who gets thrown out for not having a wedding garment. It might seem all pretty unfair and mean. I mean, he's just been in the gutter, dragged into the wedding reception. He's hardly likely to have had time to arrange the dry-cleaning of his best suit. Well, we are dealing with ancient texts here, and how they come down to us is not always the most direct and sensible route.

But as it stands in Matthew's account it still makes an important point: what you wear matters! Now of course the point here is not about physical clothing. You would remember when people made a great deal of wearing their 'Sunday best'. It was sign of respect and care, and even of devotion. I would suggest there *is* still a place in our faith lives for this. But in the parable - with the servants going off to find anyone to fill the tables at the banquet, relying in the end on those off the streets - we are told, this included *the good and the bad*. Matthew is reminding us once more of the kingdom, being a 'mixed bag'. On the way to the banquet we'll be rubbing shoulders with some odd types... And so, the man without a wedding garment stands for all those who accept the invitation but *do nothing* with that calling.

Matthew is warning his readers that it's no good to simply accept the invitation. We can't take advantage of God's good grace and generosity. We have to show it matters. And it matters most in the extent to which we allow to change us *inside out*. The wedding garment speaks to us of a conversion that has taken root and is bearing fruit. Matthew is saying to us, *what's the point of conversion if no one notices. There is no point if others don't benefit.*

A party is great but that can't be where it ends. A deep, inner conversion, a true change of heart, needs to take place. Hence in the old baptismal rites the candidate for baptism would leave their old clothes behind at the baptismal font and emerge out of the waters to be clothed in a new white garment. Some think the white robe the priest wears, the 'alb' - simply meaning 'white' - has its origins in that baptismal garment. We wear it to remind you all that this too is *your* garment. We all should be wearing our baptismal garment! If not physically then in the way we live out our lives, the way we allow the Holy Spirit to change and form our hearts and minds. Our very lives ought to show the deep change and conversion that has taken place. Christ has invited us to share in and take our place in the banquet of eternal life. We look to the great feast in hope. And we can taste and share it now. Yes, in the Eucharist, the surest foretaste on earth of the banquet of heaven. But we also show it in the quality of our lives. Let us live, then, as if our invitation were the most important thing that could ever be offered to us. Because indeed it is! Amen.