

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 29/Trinity XIX Year A 2023

The unfolding situation between Israel and the murderous and evil terrorist organization Hamas has once more highlighted the fragile state of peace that exists in that part of the world. Our prayers and solidarity are with the wronged peoples of Israel. The conflict reminds us more generally of the difficult and uncertain times we all face. We are living through a moment of great change and of global upheaval. We might not always perceive it. And what the results of this change will look like when it all settles is not yet clear. But this can elevate for us all a sense of anxiety and unease. The temptation might be to fight back or to withdraw in fear.

It is good, then, to remind ourselves that whenever humankind has faced dark, dangerous, and desperate times there has always – *always* - been beacons of light, truth, and goodness that shine through. One of the tasks of Christians is to be such beacons of light. Our task – whatever situation we find ourselves in – is to commit to lives of holiness and virtue. And to allow the very light of our lives to bring hope and to illumine a path to another way.

Even in the horrors of Nazi Germany, there were lights of faith and courage that shone through. One such was the German Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In 1933 he was instrumental in the creation of the Confessing Church, one of the key platforms of resistance to the Nazi regime. He was arrested in 1943 after being implicated in a plot to assassinate Hitler and was executed - hanged in a concentration camp, aged 39 - in April 1945. But his lasting legacy is certainly not that of a political agitator, but as a servant of Christ. (For a more fulsome biography of this important church figure from last century, I point you to Fr James 'Catholic Epistle' circulated in July this year. Just look back on your old emails from Mark.)

One of the key ideas proposed by Bonhoeffer - and something that resonates still – was his idea of 'cheap grace'. It was first formulated by him in his 1937 book, 'The Cost of Discipleship.' He wrote, "*Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like cheapjacks' wares. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut prices. Grace is represented as the Church's inexhaustible treasury, from which she showers blessings with generous hands, without asking questions or fixing limits. Grace without price; grace without cost! The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance;*

and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing. Since the cost was infinite, the possibilities of using and spending it are infinite... Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate... Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son... it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.”

This important idea of cheap grace goes some way in helping us make sense of the somewhat tricky parable placed before us today. Tricky, in the sense that while there are components that appear rather straightforward, there are a couple of stings in the tail, and all may not be as straightforward as initially seems. What we have in the parable today is essentially a reworking of the idea presented in the gospel last week. What we heard in the gospel last week was the third of three parables relating to vineyards, with the last Parable of the Wicked Tenants dealing with the key idea of rejection. Exploring one idea in two different ways is a technique Matthew uses elsewhere. So, elements in what we hear today echo what went before in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. The king parallels the vineyard owner. The guest refusing the invitation parallels the wicked tenants and so on. In both, waves of servants are sent; in both servants are mistreated and killed; in both severe punishment is meted out; and in both something is expected of newly invited. And both conform to historical events: Israel's mistreatment of the prophets, Israel's rejection of early Christian missionaries, and the movement of the church towards a gentile focus.

Now, while many of the parables contain a certain freshness and immediacy – accessible images drawn from daily life - the account today (as for last week) has strange and excessive (even unbelievable) elements. Or at least exaggerated elements. Troops execute guests and burn a city while a meal is being prepared is not everyday behaviour!... And the man thrown out is not simply ejected for having the

wrong clothes. He is cast into the outer darkness, the place of weeping and gnashing of teeth! Matthew is *not* being subtle at all. The fellow doesn't land on the street, but in hell! In other words, Matthew is not talking about a banquet and guests, but of God, the kingdom, of Jews and Gentiles, and the demands of kingdom life.

This story is oftentimes read as a lesson in God's generous inclusion. The invitation has gone out. The old religious fuddy-duddies have rejected the invitation. So, Jesus lets everyone else in, the good and the bad. And so, as this reading goes, the church should be open, inclusive, and tolerant of all. Which in some ways is of course true. The kingdom of God, the good news of God in Jesus Christ, is available for all. But even though the gospel writer Matthew has a particular concern for the church and how it should conduct itself, this is not a parable about the church. The banquet he uses here is not an image of the church. It is the image of the banquet at the end of time. We see in the story that it assumes the banquet occurs *after* the Jewish rejection, *after* the destruction of the temple, *after* the gentile in-gathering. In other words, it is looking ahead. Matthew is pointing us to the final judgment,

Which leads us to the key question, *What is the basis of this judgment?* Because it is clearly not whether one says yes or no to the invitation. This is the sting in the tail. This is where we often get tripped up in our thinking about this parable. Yes, the invitation is gracious. Yes, all are invited, both 'good and bad.' And both good and bad accept. But just because all are invited does not mean there are no standards, no expectations of the guests. A wedding garment is still needed. The image of the wedding garment is an image of new life, of putting on new life. In 'kingdom language', *righteous life*. Grace is freely given, but it is not cheap grace.

It is possible that the evangelist Matthew is addressing a situation in his church that had lost the distinction, accepting all persons and condoning all behaviour. We know this is a particularly sharp question for our day. The conversation and mood of the surrounding culture push hard against the church. We know that the particular emphasis of our day is toward grace only, affirmation only, permissiveness only. Yes, we want to be sure that our welcome is genuine and generous, and that all people indeed have an opportunity to hear and receive the gospel. But we must likewise insist on the need to 'put on' an utterly new life, to be clothed in new life. Those who tend to wallow in grace, to sever sanctification from justification, may be startled by the king's question, 'friend, how did you get here without a wedding garment?' Amen.