

OT: Exodus 32.1-14
NT: Philippians 4.1-9
Gp: Matthew 22.1-14

Planning a wedding should be a joyous event but it has its difficulties. Aside from the cost, there is that contentious issue of deciding who to invite. Just because your fiancé has had a season ticket for Manchester United for 20 years, doesn't mean that you want half the Stretford End at your wedding! Likewise, your mother may have a soft spot for so called Auntie Beryl who used to live next door when you were four but, seriously, should she be on the list?

And then once you've negotiated all those pitfalls, there is the even more delicate task of agreeing on the table plan. Who can you ask to keep an eye on Gran to stop her drinking the table dry before the meal even begins? Who will tolerate being next to Uncle Fred, the most boring man this side of the Atlantic? And then there's the 'Also Ran' table for all those whom you vaguely know or who don't fit neatly anywhere else. It's a favourite spot to put the vicar following an impulsive eleventh hour invite!

So imagine going to great cost and even greater hard work to invite all your guests, only for a significant number to decline with last minute spurious excuses. You can understand why the king is this parable from Jesus vented his frustration and told his servants to invite all the waifs and strays they found out in the streets.

"The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet."

Now here comes a difficult part of the story. Having invited everyone in without warning, it seems cruel to rant at a man found sitting without being dressed in wedding attire. To treat him with even more anger and contempt than those who declined their invitation. But the wedding robes were provided. The story implies that having been given this amazing, unexpected opportunity to attend a royal wedding banquet, the man could not be bothered to adhere to this one convention, even though the robe could have been handed to him.

So what does this mean for us? Well in this parable those originally invited were the chosen people. Those whom God had called and taught through the Law and Prophets, those to whom Jesus came as Lord and Redeemer. But not everyone listened and Jesus was rejected by many, especially the religious authorities of his day. They found trivial reasons not to accept his invitation.

So Jesus made it clear that he had come as the Messiah for everyone and that the invitation to the kingdom of God had been sent out to all people. A message reinforced by the ministry of St Paul, the apostle to the

Gentiles. And so we each hold this precious request for our presence in God's kingdom, not an embossed card or a golden ticket but the cross marked on our foreheads at our baptism when Christ claimed us for his own.

All this has been given to us without any effort on our part, just like those brought into the banqueting hall from the streets. We are only required to put on the wedding robe, to open our hearts to all the love that God is wanting to lavish upon us. We have to trust in his goodness and mercy. We have to echo Paul's belief *that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*

We have to be good guests too. Not hogging the best food and wine for ourselves but sharing with others at the table, putting their needs before our own, serving them. Nor should we dominate the conversation but we should be alert to the stories that others have to share, we should listen with patience, we should relish this opportunity to meet with all whom God has called, to rejoice in our common humanity, to learn more about others and their lives and in doing so come to know ourselves better.

Isaiah tells us about a rich feast waiting for God's people on his holy mountain when death is conquered and all tears are wiped away. This is the promise at the end of our earthly lives but we have this opportunity in this world to live life to the full, to experience the richness of God's grace in all his creation, to be mindful of those in need, to do all in our power to bring the peace of God's kingdom to the here and now.

This week we have seen and heard such stories of violence and hatred, a potent reminder of the presence of evil in our damaged world. It would be wrong to take sides, to uphold the old ways of pitching Jew against Arab, Arab against Jew. Rather it is the powerful and the selfish against the innocent and the vulnerable. And it feels that the innocent and the vulnerable always lose.

This is where we must trust in God, the one true God.

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Let us continue to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, let us work for peace in the place where we are so that it spreads out like ripples in a pond. We are all guests here together and no one has the right to lord it over another. We have to learn to live in contentment with ourselves, in a spirit of caring for one another, in a wish to work to heal the human made divisions in our world. And in doing so, let us ponder on the opening words of Psalm 23 and the overwhelming promise they contain.

The Lord is my shepherd; therefore can I lack nothing.

Revd Michelle Montrose