



Gloucestershire Circuit Worship At Home for Sunday 11 October 2020

Opening Prayer

Almighty God, we come into your presence with thanksgiving, to praise your holy name. We lift your name on high and proclaim your greatness. We give thanks to the Lord for He is good and His love endures for ever.

Hymn: 36 There's a quiet understanding

Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words

There's a quiet understanding
when we're gathered in the Spirit,
it's a promise that he gives us,
when we gather in his name.
There's a love we feel in Jesus,
there's a manna that he feeds us,
it's a promise that he gives us,
when we gather in his name.

And we know when we're together,
sharing love and understanding,
that our brothers and our sisters
feel the oneness that he brings.
Thank you, thank you, thank you, Jesus,
for the way you love and feed us,
for the many ways you lead us;
thank you, thank you, Lord;
thank you, thank you, Lord.

Tedd Smith (b. 1927)

Let us pray together

Father God, creator of the world and universe, look down upon us as we gather in your name. Although we may be worshipping in different places we pray that we shall be strengthened through your Word and the unity we have in Jesus Christ. We are not alone in our worship and add our praises to all who meet in the name of Jesus today. Creation speaks of your love and we are blessed with many gifts. Sadly, we have abused those gifts and have not always acted in ways that are pleasing to you. Have mercy upon us O' Lord, and show us how we can make your world a better place in which to live. May your blessing be with us today and every day; for we ask this in Jesus' name.

Today's Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 25: 1-9

Today's Gospel Reading: Matthew 22: 1-14

God's Invitation

Entertaining at home is not one of my strong points. It's not that I don't enjoy it but it's all the forward planning that I struggle with: First there is the notion of looking ahead and choosing a date - my thinking tends to be Sunday to Sunday. Then there is thinking about the menu, checking what foods people can and can't eat; issuing the invitations, making the shopping list, doing the shopping, doing the cooking and so on. I just find that too often we just don't get round to planning it. More often than not if it happens it is a spontaneous - "come back to ours for lunch" and then we dash home stopping via the Co-op to pick up some ready prepared food on the way!

Clearly none of this is a problem for the king in this story - he has servants to do all the work for him. The parable is about a king who is holding a wedding banquet for his son, so it is a very special and auspicious occasion. The King's servants are sent out to deliver the invitations. Then they make the preparations and then go out again to summon the guests on the day.

This gives us an insight into how things were done in the past before the invention of clocks and diaries to rule our lives minute by minute. You couldn't issue and email or even put a printed invitation card in the post! So instead you would issue a "save the date" type invitation in person or by sending your servants with the message, and then at the due time you'd go out and summon them saying "Come along now is the time, all is prepared and ready".

In this case though the guests didn't want to come! Who doesn't come if you've received an invitation from the King? How disrespectful! No wonder the King was angry. So he sends the servants out again to describe just how sumptuous this feast is going to be, something surely not to be missed! But it does no good - the perspective guests all find excuses not to come and some even abuse the messengers.

So the king punishes those who have responded with violence to his messengers and declares them unworthy anyway. Instead, the messengers go out and bring in anyone they can find from the streets to come to the banquet. Which is fine - except for one who is thrown out for being improperly dressed!

The Wedding Banquet is of course a metaphor for the Kingdom of God. Jesus is using this metaphor, common in the Old Testament, to describe what life will be like when God reigns supreme. But the kingdom begins here and now with God's church on earth and so we can learn what it means to live by the values of God's kingdom:

Firstly, we see that a wedding banquet is a place that is fun, where people go to celebrate - a place of joy. So it seems that we should understand the Kingdom also as a place of joy and celebration. I wonder if we should remember that more often in church.

Then, preparing a feast to celebrate an important event in another person's life is an act of love as well as of hospitality. This is a feast to celebrate the marriage of the king's son. I remember a couple who were celebrating their diamond wedding and their children were organising the event. One of them remarked that the effort that went into the preparation was a measure of the love they had for the couple. Which perhaps serves to remind us that the quality of our celebration on a Sunday in worship is similarly a measure of our love for Christ.

We get an image here of God's love and hospitality and of his yearning to celebrate with us. How should we respond to this invitation to celebrate?

Another point that the story is making is that the people who came in the end were not those who were formally invited. The original prospective guests weren't queuing up to get in! They turned down the invitation because they were too preoccupied with other things in their lives. They allowed other cares to overtake their commitment to celebrate the wedding of the King's son. So they missed out on the opportunity and others came took their place instead.

The allegory here is the people on whom Jesus focusses his ministry. Jesus began by focussing his message on a particular group of people but the important message here is that ALL are invited to be part of the kingdom from now on and this word "All" represents a distinctive feature of our Methodist theology and understanding. The message of the Methodist Church is often summed up in four 'alls': All need to be saved; All may be saved; All may know themselves saved; and All may be saved to the uttermost.

But notice the word "May". All "may be saved" not "all will be saved". In other words the invitation is issued but it has to be accepted and acted upon. I think this is another point of the story. Those who were invited chose not to accept the invitation so others were invited and did accept the invitation.

God invites us all into his kingdom - but will we accept the invitation? Or will God find other people to come to his banquet on the day of judgement, perhaps people we would not initially think would be invited?

Do we see ourselves as one of the elite who was first invited but turned down the invitation or as the undeserving outside, brought in from the streets and invited anyway? Are we one of the ones who make excuses when God invites us to his celebration? Or are we one of those who come with joy and gratitude?

The equivalent story in Luke's gospel is in Luke 14: 15-24. In this version the excuses given by those who refuse to come to feast are different to those in the Matthew's version - they actually reflect Deuteronomy 20:5-8 where there is a list of legitimate excuses for refusing to take part in holy war. The gospel story is therefore making clear that there are *no* legitimate excuses for refusing to come when Christ calls. We can make the choice to come or not to come, but we cannot claim to have a valid excuse.

Finally we need to address that odd bit at the end where a guest is thrown out for being inappropriately dressed. The king is actually so incensed that he not only expels this guest but has him bound hand and foot and thrown into the darkness. But we might ask the question how could he be properly dressed for a wedding banquet if he had been invited in from the streets?

This is a bit of a puzzle and we can't know for sure but one suggestion is that the custom might have been for the host to provide robes for the guests to wear. So someone refusing to wear the robes offered after accepting the invitation might be seen to be ungrateful or disrespectful. When God calls us he expects us to metaphorically 'change our clothes' - In other words our response to his call must be genuine. If we are not here because we genuinely seek to serve and follow Christ in discipleship and love then we are here under false pretences. If we are genuine then it will be seen in our attitudes, our behaviour. We might say we 'turn over a new leaf' as we try our hardest to put into practice the law of love that Jesus teaches us.

Another thing that is clear from this part of the story and that is that judgement is clearly reserved to God. It is not the servants that identify the man wearing the wrong clothes and throw him out but the king himself. In other words that judgement is not ours to make - it is God's. Our role is to accept God's invitation, change our clothes and welcome and love our fellow invitees into the kingdom.

Andrew Biggs 5/10/2020

A time of prayer

God of love and compassion; we lay our broken world at your feet. Our world continues to be torn apart by war, fear and hate and people are oppressed by those who seek power for themselves with little thought for the needs of others.

We think for our towns and communities, many of which are fragmented and divided. Diversity can bring richness and strength to our communities, but can be used to promote fear and hatred. Show us how old pains and wounds can be used to bring new life and hope.

We think of those whose lives have been broken, through sorrow and grief, illness, and fractured relationships. Life may seem to have lost its purpose. May the gift of your healing grace bring a new sense of purpose and love.

On this Homeless and Prison Sunday we think of those who have found themselves homeless and destitute not knowing where to turn. We remember those who have committed crimes, and are in prison or just been released. As we recognise the need for justice may we act with compassion and mercy, remembering how God deals with us.

We draw our prayers of intercession to a close by saying aloud or in our mind these words:

Almighty God, give us hearts of compassion so that we can bless those whom we meet.
Help us to bring peace and comfort to those who are in distress. May your Spirit give us life and strength and show us how we can share God's love, joy and peace and be true servants of Christ. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven
Hallowed be thy name
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory
for ever and ever Amen.

Hymn STF 37 You're calling us

You're calling us
and so we are gathered here.
You're building us
into a house of prayer.

A holy place
where stories of grace are told;
a sacred space
where miracles unfold
and praises rise
from the offering of our lives.
Let's fill this house,
let's fill this house.
Call the seeker,
call the stranger,
call the children,
let's hear their praises.
Call the lonely,
call the broken,
young and old

will sing hosannas.
Let's fill this house,
let's fill this house
with praise.

We're living stones
built together here
with nail-pierced hands -
oh teach us holy fear.

And prayer will rise
for all nations;
and open skies
will pour your glory down;
and there'll be praise,
for the Lord is in this place.
Let's fill this house,
let's fill this house.

Call the seeker ...
Graham Kendrick (b. 1950)

A prayer of blessing

May your grace, love and peace, inspire and strengthen us now, and in the days to come. In Jesus' name we ask this. Amen.

Original Prayers by John Roughley

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