

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost 9th October 2005

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What do we think of when we imagine a wedding? A service? A celebrant? A formal occasion? A day when the family gathers from all around only to disperse again?

The Wedding banquet in Jesus day was not just a day but involved a whole community over many weeks of preparation. Then it was not at 2pm on Saturday but when everything was ready and the bridegroom arrived. Nor did it finish in a day but went on for a week or more. It was a big deal!

More than that, it symbolized the relationship of God with people as so often it had in the stories of the prophets (especially Hosea). It was also seen as the completion of one's religious duty which had begun at circumcision. It was the complete package and so often the coming of the Messiah was described as the coming of the bridegroom to the bride who was the people of Israel.

In today's gospel two parables are spliced together:

The parable of the great banquet.

AND

The parable of the man without the wedding garment.

If we compare the version in Matthew to the version in Luke and the version in the gospel of Thomas (a book not in our bible but nevertheless an early document about Jesus) the story of the banquet occurs on its own WITHOUT the wedding garment story. This most likely indicates that the great banquet story originally stood on it's own.

In this way it would have meant that the chief priests and Pharisees were those guests originally invited to the great banquet but had cut themselves off by their failure to turn up when summoned

and their maltreatment of the messengers. (A similar theme was evident in the vineyard story!)

At the human level the rejection of the invitation would have been unthinkable.

Their rejection opens up the invitation to all and sundry. “they gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.”

It seems that Matthew has therefore combined the two parables and has produced an unrealistic effect – How could the poor man have been expected to have a wedding garment if he had been dragged off the street unexpectedly? Possibly this second parable had a different beginning – it may well have been part of two Rabbinic parables which were around in Jesus’ time but which BOTH told about a king who ISSUED wedding garments expecting readiness to enter his banquet.

As the stories are combined it seems Matthew interprets them this way. The gathering in of the people from the streets “both good and bad” is a reference to Jesus prediction of the mission to the Gentiles – the second parable is a sober reminder of the expectations and requirements of membership of that kingdom. Membership has its responsibilities!

The question is “What might this refer to?”

Not circumcision... because this issue had been well and truly settled by the time Matthew wrote.

Some think the standards of membership may have been those mentioned in Acts ch15

Abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols,
 from blood,
 from animals that have been strangled,
 and
 from sexual immorality.

The story of the man without the wedding garment, like many other parables is an encouragement

to be ready in the face of the coming Kingdom of God. The invitation had come sooner than expected and it caught him unprepared!

We need to remember that in Christ is the Kingdom present – breaking into humanity and so Jesus (and Matthew our author) are reminding people about readiness – a theme which grows stronger as we draw to the end of Pentecost and closer to Advent.

Going back to the first parable the details of destruction reflect the events in Jerusalem from the year 66 to 70...the Jewish war and the destruction of Jerusalem. And so the parable is also an interpretation of the debacle of those years – they were seen as the punishment of Israel for rejecting the gospel as well as for persecuting Christians and putting them to death.

Other versions of parable number 1 describe the event simply as a banquet given as a private individual BUT in Matthew it has become a "Wedding Feast" given by a King for his Son. As already mentioned the wedding feast was a common image of the coming of the kingdom. The King is God and the Son is Jesus. This is of course a perfect reinterpretation of the message as the early Christians looked back after the resurrection.

If we want to ask what Jesus meant when HE told the parable; we must disregard the later elements.

Jesus' delivery of the story makes it a judgement on his contemporaries who reject his message to participate in the coming kingdom. It is also an assurance to the outcast "men and women" in the street who have already celebrated the Great Banquet in advance with Jesus when he ate and drank with "Tax Collectors and Sinners"

The second part about the man without the wedding garment is a warning about preparedness. It is

a warning that membership in the kingdom has its responsibilities and I would like us to think of our Stewardship as one of those responsibilities.

Some months ago we spoke at Parish Council about having some weeks set aside to talk about Stewardship. Now I know that when that word is mentioned it mostly raises in our minds the question of money but it is much, much more!

I have for along time been disappointed that we in the church have assumed some kind of ownership of the word and it has often only been applied to our giving of money to the church. Stewardship is about everything we have and own and how we manage it. From the gifts of God in creation to our time our relationships, our possessions, and our money. Two weeks ago Stephen Palethorpe spoke to us about Stewardship – the stewardship of creation and the environment! Last week in the baptism of little Zack Howarth we were reminded of the stewardship of our faith – what it means and how we apply it!

Today the gospel reminds us of the responsibilities of our membership in the Kingdom of Heaven – and Paul in his letter to the Philippians (not us at St Philip's...the Philippians of Philippi) writes

about the stewardship of life.

“stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

2 I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.

3 Yes, and I ask you also,

my loyal companion, help these women,

for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel,

together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers,

whose names are in the book of life.

4 Rejoice in the Lord always;

again I will say, Rejoice.

5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone.

The Lord is near.

6 Do not worry about anything,

but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving

let your requests be made known to God.

7 And the peace of God,

which surpasses all understanding,

will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, beloved,

whatever is true, whatever is honourable,

whatever is just, whatever is pure,
whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable,
if there is any excellence
and if there is anything worthy of praise,
think about these things.”

Now the term Steward / householder / manager in the New Testament translates from the Greek word “oikonomos” from which we get the word “economy”.

Two elements of the economy of our parish are:

1. The Annual Electoral Meeting IN TWO WEEKS TIME!!!

And

2. The Annual General Meeting at the beginning of each year.

I urge you to take an interest and especially to take an interest in how much it takes to run this parish. I really hate being the person to point this out because I am the only paid staff member. I will say more next week about this.

But for now we think of our stewardship of everything and particularly our life as the people of St Philip's as one aspect of our membership in the Kingdom of Heaven.