

“Whatever is true, whatever is honourable....”

A sermon preached by Revd Dr William Whyte on the 18th Sunday of Trinity 11 Oct 2020

Refs: Isaiah 25.1-9; Philippians 4. 1 – 9; Matthew 22.1-14

Today’s Gospel is all about what happens when weddings go wrong. And weddings often do. They tend to be moments of heightened emotion: moments of celebration, certainly; but also moments of stress and anxiety. There is the joy of the bride and the groom. There is also, often, worry about their future. People present may likewise have regrets – or even anger – about the past. So weddings often turn out to be much less fun than they should be: less moments of pleasure and more moments of profound emotional upheaval.

In our Gospel, we see a very extreme version of this old, familiar story. In first-century Palestine weddings were not just the celebration of two people who were in love. Indeed, they might not even be that. Rather, they reflected the union of two families – the creation of new economic and political units. They were a chance for the wealthy and the powerful to celebrate that power: spending lavishly or create a grand and impressive effect. To symbolize this, wedding guests were given grand robes to wear.

Here, a king is marrying off his son. He invites his subjects – but they have better things to do. He is furious, instructing his slaves to punish them accordingly. He also rounds up a new set of guests, but, on arrival at the wedding feast, he finds that one of these new guests has refused to wear the gown he has been given. Finding no satisfactory answer, the king condemns the ungrateful guest to prison.

The core message of the passage is pretty plain. This is an account of ingratitude and disobedience. The king’s subjects do not accept his invitation. One of those who does attend is willing to accept the king’s hospitality, but not to wear the robe that entitles him to it. All are punished as a result.

It’s a rather grim story – but also one that seems to me particularly pertinent at the moment. In our current crisis, with all the uncertainty and anxiety and stress we are all feeling, it is easy to forget God. It is easier still to forget our debt to God: to be disobedient; to be ungrateful. To be, in other words, just like the people in this story: people who are, on the one hand, too busy to do what God wants; people who are, on the other hand, willing to take from God, but not to do anything in return.

A constant danger, these twin temptations are all the more prevalent now. All the anxiety, all the stress of the pandemic make it ever more likely that we focus on our fears, our worries, ourselves, and that we forget our relationship with God as a result. Amidst all of this, it is all too easy, too, to neglect or forget our many blessings – the many reasons we have for being grateful to God.

This Gospel is a warning therefore – and, potentially, rather a frightening one. But I think we need to read it carefully before we become too depressed. The king expects loyalty. He requires obedience and gratitude. But he doesn’t expect much more than that. All the man at the wedding feast needed to do was wear a robe: to take the clothes that had been offered and to put them on. He didn’t need to celebrate. He didn’t need to feel happy. He just needed to do the bare minimum. He just needed to take what offered and use it.

It’s in that way that our epistle – the letter to the Philippians – provides a guide as what God expects from us. Not a stubborn refusal to see the world for what it is. Not a pretence at happiness, when we are fearful or suffering. Not a superhuman effort to remain cheerful despite it all. We cannot will

ourselves to be good or force ourselves to celebrate when all around seems so tough. No – all we are asked to do is to take what we are given and acknowledge it.

‘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’, we read. That is all we’re meant to do: to look for these glimpses of what is better; and to remember that they come from God. Pursuing those things that feel good; doing those things that do right; discerning those moments in which we come closer to God: that is what we’re asked to do. And if we do so, we won’t just please God, we will also be sustained through these dark times. I pray that, this week, we see something of this in our lives.

Amen