

Trinity 19, 15th October

Isaiah 25:1-9, Philippians 4: 1-9 and Mathew 22: 1-14

Mother Alice

Many are called, and few are chosen, says Jesus at the end of this parable of the Wedding Feast. Indeed, he is right, by the time the feast actually takes place a huge number of people have been invited. The first set of invitees are the ones who make their excuses, or worse decide to reject not just the invitation but those who brought it. And the next set of invitees are seemingly the 'B' list – invited mainly to fill up the space. But again, huge numbers are invited, and this time they do respond and come in. So why, when the King seems to have relaxed somewhat and become more inclusive and generous in widening his invitation, does he then become totally enraged to see someone not wearing a wedding robe, and consequently choose to throw them out? These words seem really very harsh, confusing, not the description of the God of love that we worship.

These 'invitation' parables I think can feel quite uncomfortable to hear, because they also cause us to reflect on our own experiences of calling, and the way we have responded. I wonder if there was a group mentioned that felt something a bit like your experience? I definitely feel myself and my calling to faith as part of the second wave of invitations, where the slaves are sent out to call literally everyone to come and fill up the space. I wasn't raised in a Christian home, and I sometimes feel a pang of jealousy of those who were, those who had that invitation to faith earlier in their lives. I do feel empathy with that second wave of invitees, those who perhaps didn't get the full memo, and had to have extra explanation about how things were meant to be. In my journey of faith, I've had to learn myself how to read Scripture, how to worship, what the rules I guess, and etiquette are in Church. I was conducting a wedding here yesterday and honestly my mind suddenly went blank as to what vestments I was supposed to be wearing – thankfully wonderful Simon reassured me that my outfit choice was indeed the right one for the occasion! But you know I feel this huge sympathy with the man who I imagine to be tucking in to his dinner, and suddenly is hauled up before the King and condemned and cast out. I know what it feels like to be ignorant in a faith community and to feel welcome, and yet still a bit of an outsider.

In all honesty, we are all the B list invitees. And the reason I can say that, is because, simply, we are here. If we heard the call of God and said no, then we wouldn't be here. Maybe we heard the call earlier and made our excuses, and then came back sheepishly. Maybe we have fought hard against God somehow in our lives, intellectually rejecting faith or criticising those who have it. But we are here, we are counted amongst those who are 'good and bad', called from the city and from places far away to join this marriage banquet of Christ to his Church. God's grace has welcomed us home, made room for us, made room for our neighbours, people we might not expect to be sitting next to.

But it feels disproportionately harsh doesn't it, that this man is cast out, one who did actually say yes, he didn't make excuses, he didn't go and kill someone. He said yes, didn't he? He actually showed up, joined in, was present. Why did it matter so much what he was wearing?

I think we miss the point if we understand the King's rage simply to be about the wrong piece of fabric. The wedding robe, and what it symbolises, it the visible outworking of the invisible inner working. Or conversely, that lack of the wedding robe, indicates the shallowness of the man's actual response. He hasn't really said yes to this banquet, else he would obviously been dressed

appropriately – so that others are able to SEE that he has said yes, see that he understands he is at a wedding banquet, see that saying yes to attending has made a visible change. I don't think God cares really about fabric, but I do think he cares that our response to His calling changes us from the inside out, so that it really is visible. So that there is something different and distinctive about us, something also that unites us with others who have also come to this beautiful heavenly banquet.

Paul, at the end of his letter to the Philippians, I think goes some way to naming what is this internal change with visible outworking. Saying yes to God changes us, and perhaps the first visible sign of this is a spirit of joy. Rejoice – Paul says. If God has called us, called us to his banquet even despite our unworthiness, then we can be truly thankful, joyful people, and this rejoicing will spill out, be visible in our demeanour, in our words, in our actions. Likewise, Paul speaks of gentleness, that is known to everyone. That powerful witness of treating others as our brothers and sisters with real care. Finally he speaks of peace. Peace which is a deep well in our hearts and flows out so that we know things will, in the end, be ok. Do not worry he says – but pray instead! These things, though they are not tangible as a garment, are nonetheless incredibly powerful as our 'outward vesture'. And this, I think is why the man at the banquet was cast out, because neither his inner nor outer being demonstrated his true acceptance of the invitation.

But what of this 'few are chosen'? Well, I wonder if again this is a question of perception. Being called is just the beginning. Being chosen is not something of our control, it is God who calls, God who chooses. Look just how many people in this parable say no to God. Fail to hear, fail to respond, do almost anything in order not to respond. So it is true, that few are chosen. Few hear God's call, and say yes in a way that shows visibly that they really do understand what they are saying yes to. Being chosen by God is a matter of revelation, of simply knowing not just that there is a God, but knowing that He invites you personally, you with all your faults and failings, you just exactly as you are. Do not think that the 'few' are some sort of heroes of the faith. You are the few. You are the ones who have not only heard the call, but responded, and day by day are being changed into his likeness. So I encourage you to know this truth – that you have been chosen by God, He is working His purposes out in you, and the visibility of that is truly beautiful.

Being a people of joy, and love, and peace, is what we are called to be. May we choose once again to clothe ourselves with such things, and to serve the God who calls.

Amen.