

Year A Proper 28 15th October 2023

Isaiah 25:1-9

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

Hands up who doesn't like a party? I thought so, we like parties, and of course we know that Jesus likes parties and God likes parties. How do we know that? Well, because the Bible is full of stories about feasts and parties and they wouldn't be in the Bible if God didn't want them to be in there, especially ones about the ultimate wedding feast, such as in Isaiah 25 where it says that God will prepare a feast of choice meats and fine wines for all people and in Revelation 19 where it talks about the wedding feast of the Lamb.

So, what are we to make of today's Gospel reading which talks of cities being burned and people being killed or thrown into outer darkness? How does that fit in with our understanding of God being a God of love, a God of inclusion?

Well, I have read a multiplicity of explanations and I will offer you a selection so that you can make your own minds up. But before I do, it's probably best to make a couple of things clear at the outset. First of all, anyone listening to Matthew's version of this parable would have immediately understood that the King referred to God and King's son referred to the Messiah. Luke's version in chapter 14 of his Gospel is quite different, a version where the host doesn't get cross and people rejecting the invitation but is nevertheless determined there should be no empty seats at his banquet.

Secondly in most societies and cultures our understanding of marriage today is very different to what it was then. Nowadays, people in most cultures marry for love, whereas then marriage was a contract between the groom and the father of the bride. The woman had no say in who she was married to, and even today, in some

cultures, the bridegroom, let alone the bride, doesn't have much of a say.

To realise how much things have changed, I was interested to discover that wedding liturgies only started being used about 900 years ago. So, we are talking about very different customs and practices in Jesus' day. It's worth reminding ourselves that Joseph would have every right to tear up his contract with Mary's father to marry Mary without paying any penalty when he discovered she was pregnant.

So, what is going on here? People can't even agree whether this parable is an allegory or not, in other words the parable is symbolic of something rather than to be taken literally. Some commentators are convinced it is, others are convinced it is not. Personally, I think it is mainly allegorical, but not necessarily to the point where the first set of slaves are the Old Testament prophets and the second set are the apostles and so on and so on.

But perhaps the key question that has divided people is where is God in this parable? If God is a God of love then he can't be the King, say some commentators, because he wouldn't go round killing people and burning cities as it says in verse 7. (Some commentators think that Matthew added that verse to reflect the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.)

They argue that the traditional interpretation of the parable, that the Jews, especially the Jewish leaders have got it all wrong yet again and are excluded from the kingdom, while the gentiles, i.e. Christians, are accepted, is yet another example of antisemitism – and that is something we definitely don't need any more of at the moment.

And we are increasingly coming to realise just how many people have been hurt by Church down the years, which suggests that Christians are also very good at getting God wrong. Only a couple of days ago

we drove past a church on East Fettes Avenue called the True Jesus Church and I felt really uncomfortable because it suggests an arrogance about their understanding of God that I don't think any Christian is entitled to.

One commentator, who I regularly find very helpful when I am thinking about sermons, suggests that maybe we project God onto the King, that because we can be easily offended or easily angered, God is like that too.

She suggests that Jesus is to be found in the guest who refused to dress up, who refused to agree to the demands of a tyrannical King that people were only welcome if they behaved in a certain way, who brings the sham celebration to a halt, who is willing to be cast into outer darkness.

And that is an appealing interpretation in many ways. It fits in that we know that Jesus identified particularly with the poor, with outcasts and the marginalised and certainly with the people who were hauled in from the highways and byways after the original guests made their excuses and didn't bother to turn up.

But I'm not sure it is necessarily the right interpretation. But equally I don't believe that the King in the parable is meant to represent God either. Because I am not sure that where God is exactly in this parable is what really matters.

I think that the point that Jesus is really trying to make, even with Matthew's gloss on it, is that choices have consequences. The Bible is one long story of God inviting us to join his party, the best party any of us could imagine.

Why would we refuse to go to such a party? One very simple reason is that God has given us the option to say No, I don't want to go, I'm perfectly happy in my own little world thank you. Precisely because

we have the option to say No, actually we actively have to say Yes to God's invitation. If we didn't have free will, saying Yes would be fairly meaningless.

What the parable makes clear is that God's wedding feast is for absolutely everyone, and particularly for those we wouldn't necessarily invite to our own weddings.

And yes, God does love sinners, murderers, thieves, abusers, the lot. And yes, we are right to tell people that God is love, yes, we are right to tell people that God is inclusive, yes, we are right to tell people God accepts us as we are, but that absolutely does not mean that God is happy for us to stay as we are. Far from it. He didn't tell the blind and the lame people they were fine just as they were, no he healed them.

It's not enough, as one commentator puts it, to RSVP to the invitation to the heavenly banquet and just show up in our grubbies. No, we are called to throw away our greed, our manipulative behaviour, our disregard for those in desperate need etc. Instead, we are to clothe ourselves in things such as holiness, justice, love, mercy, righteousness and truth once we accept the invitation. If we are not willing to dress like that, then in effect we are saying we don't want to go to God's party. Little wonder that the king threw out the guest who demonstrated all too clearly that he didn't want to be there.

It's not enough to call ourselves followers of Christ and act as if we had had never heard the Sermon of the Mount. Almost 30 years ago Stanley Hauerwas, the American theologian, wrote "Christians in modernity thought their task was to make the Gospel intelligible to the world rather than to help the world understand why it could not be intelligible without the Gospel."

If that means ruffling feathers, then so be it. Better that than being refused entry to the party to end all parties.