

Sermon preached at King's College Chapel

Sunday October 14th 2018

Matthew 22.1-14

Many are called, but few are chosen

If ever a saying of Jesus has been seized upon, relished, weaponised, even bowdlerised, this is definitely one. To a more cautious person, perhaps one who listens more than speaks, it can be the cause of immense discomfort and anxiety. Can I ever be good enough to stay at the feast? I'd like gently to suggest that lantern-jawed optimism and over-anxious pessimism can both be set aside. We do better to listen to what Jesus is telling us about the quality of the king's hospitality: the character of his invitation.

Jesus is aiming the Parable of the Wedding Banquet at the religious authorities of his day, the 'chief priests and pharisees'. He is already in Jerusalem: in the Temple precincts, with only days to go before his arrest and execution. This parable would have fuelled further their self-righteous, defensive rage. They (and indeed all his listeners) would have recognised the scriptural resonances. In the book of Proverbs the lady Wisdom prepares a fine feast and invites those who would 'walk in the way of insight' to eat of her bread and wine. The not-so-ladylike Folly also issues an invitation to the passers-by, but to water that has been stolen and bread to be 'eaten in secret'. If Jesus was suggesting that those fine upstanding leaders of the Jews were spurning his wise invitation to join the feast of the king, his father, not only were they risking a terrible recompense, but they were also no better than the seedy clients of the harlot Folly.

We have pharisees in our own day, sad to say. Indeed, it's a real risk for any of us who are vocal or visible in our faith or have some kind of specific role in the Church. The risk is that we become censorious, or dogmatic, or judgmental. We have our set of beliefs, and become neurotic in our defence of them. This can take grotesque form, of course: look at some of the people who cluster round Mr Trump at his weekly prayer breakfast. But we shouldn't take too easy a comfort in our own more progressive citadels. There's 'liberal fundamentalism' too, and it's not pretty either. All such exclusive ways of being Christian tend to be aggressive or shrill, defining ourselves over against others. The problem with sticking to a dogmatic line is that if you're not totally right, you're going to be totally wrong. That's where the neurosis arises, the over-reaction to criticism, the fear masked as anger.

One of the toxins in all this is the eagerness to judge others. We're tempted to hear lines like *Many are called, but few are chosen* and then start allocating outcomes to people. A couple of years ago a student involved in the Christian Union's big mission week here confided to me his disquiet at their early morning

planning meetings: it was a repeated refrain that someone or other was bound for hell. This amounts to a kind of blasphemous pride, dare I say: only God can judge, only God can forgive sins. The bible is emphatically clear about this.

What is not emphatically clear is quite how we are to understand today's bible story, and especially that line, *Many are called, but few are chosen*. The first half of the parable seems to be about the way the Jewish people, and especially its religious leaders, have responded to God's call. They have not responded, and punitive destruction comes upon them. Many scholars hear in this an anticipation of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD (some forty years after Jesus told the parable): troops were indeed sent, many killed and the city burned.

But in the parable the king renews his invitation, this time for everyone else, on whom he eventually also casts his judging eye. If this is about the extension of God's invitation to all people, which is to say the rest of the world, that began in Jesus' own lifetime; which is to say, certainly not after the destruction of Jerusalem, very obviously.

All that this tells us is that we should be very cautious of trying to interpret Jesus' parables as though they were complex allegories, where every element stands for something; and with a linear timeline. So that description of the punishment meted out on those who refuse God's invitation (troops, destruction, burning) might well have reminded Matthew's first audience of the destruction of Jerusalem because for them it had only just happened. And they were probably all Jewish converts in northern Palestine, who would have felt it especially keenly. But for us grappling with the text that's a matter of literary prowess, not historical exactness.

With any parable we need to keep checking our interpretive focus, checking what magnitude of lens we're using. If we pull back a bit from the minutiae we can detect the point of the story. The point is tripartite: God invites absolutely everyone into his kingdom: that kingdom is like a feast (which speaks of hospitality and company and enjoyment and nourishment); and a certain etiquette is required of a guest, or you might not be able to stay.

Within the parable, the etiquette bit is being properly dressed for a wedding feast. In its meaning for us, quite what getting the etiquette right involves is not spelled out. We get plenty of clues from what Jesus has to say elsewhere, of course, otherwise we'd be clue-less about living a Christian life. But with those unambiguous biblical injunctions not to judge others ringing in our ears, we have to be careful not become judgmental in our understanding of what the etiquette looks like; what Christian life and belief look like. The more fixed such an understanding gets, the easier it is to declare who comes up to scratch – and who doesn't.

In fact, it is not possible to distil a fixed or definitive understanding of the whole content of Christian living and belief: the biblical material we have to work with

is too rich, too multi-dimensional for that. There are certainly some fundamentals, not least the command (command!) to love God and love your neighbour; they include many fundamentals of belief. But Christian life, by which I mean a Christian's life, is more like an exploratory journey than a fixed state – and undertaken in company with others on the same journey. Any such life, in all its wondering, hopeful, accident-prone fullness, should be lived as a response to God's invitation. The better we try to understand the character of his hospitality, the better the chances we have of enjoying it, and of living out that joy.

God's invitation is a bit like when Jesus says to some potential followers at the start of his ministry, *Come and see*. If we hear that invitation, and hear it as from God, we are going to want to be there, at the feast, and get what I've called the etiquette right. In turn we should want to share that invitation. We too should want to say *Come and see*. And if we can do this with humble hopefulness, rather than assertive dogmatism, we should be better in tune with the quality of God's hospitality.

This way of looking at things is what I'd call humility in the face of God's magnificent mystery; some might just call it 'liberalism', and pejoratively. A few others simply call me a false teacher, as it happens, but let's not fret about that. There's another word which begins with 'liberal', and that's *liberality*. If we recognise the liberality of God's invitation and then try to live it out in our own lives, then by his grace we might be the kind of guests he was hoping for at the feast.