

11th October 2026, St Leonard's, Denmark

After Pentecost [28] Year A: *Isaiah 25.1-9, Psalm 23, Philippians 4:1-9, Matthew 22:1-14*

Through the written word and the spoken word may we know your Living Word, Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen

I must confess that I relish ‘a quiet night in’, and have often spent a day prevaricating about whether to go to a party, then piking out at the last minute – opting for a cosy night watching a film, offering some probably transparent excuse, or simply not going and telling myself no-one will notice, or worst of all convincing myself I have nothing to wear – all excuses allowing apathy to overwhelm the voice that says – ‘you really need to get out and enjoy yourself’ – and then, of course, hearing that it was the best party ever – a happy buzz, amazing food, great music, much dancing - and being told ‘ You really should have been there, you’d have loved it!’

And it’s not just parties. I’m sure we have all experienced a reluctance to go exploring, to learn more, grow more, help more, give more. There are small opportunities and potentially life-changing opportunities and many reasons we might find to decline them – commitments, tiredness, uncertainty, worry over what people will think, fear of the unknown. Undoubtedly there are times we should confidently say ‘no’ to an invitation, but when our hearts say ‘yes’ but something heavy within us says ‘no’ we can suffer greatly. Turning our back on invitations can have a number of consequences –aside from feeling boring and middle-aged - isolation, depression, self-doubt, a painful sense of having missed out, sadness or even bitterness over what might have been. But we have a second opportunity to grow, by exploring the source of these unhappy feelings and seeking out a new path to a rich and fulfilling life.

The divine invitation to fullness of life is always there, it is only our own indifference or hardness of heart that will block/neglect/refuse it. This seems to me to be the essence of the parable of the wedding banquet, and a cornerstone of Jesus’ teaching as a whole. But there are elements of Matthew’s telling that sit uncomfortably with this, or need some chewing over.

There are two other versions of the parable. In the Gospels of Luke and Thomas the emphasis is on the extended invitation, and the loss to those who rejected the original invitation. In Thomas, a man receives guests, then invites them to dinner. Various excuses are made, so he instructs his servant to ‘bring back those whom you happen to meet’ saying the busy “Businessmen and merchants who refused will not enter the Places of My Father.” In Luke, “someone gave a great dinner and invited many” sending a slave with the message: “Come, for everything is ready now.” Upon hearing the various apologies and excuses, the angered master instructs his servant to “bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame” and then, as there is still room, to ‘Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those invited will taste my dinner.”

In Matthew, the stakes are lifted and a king issues invitations to a wedding banquet for his son. The invitation is lightly dismissed by the invitees, even after being told that fat calves have been slaughtered and everything is ready. On top of this, the messengers are also murdered by some of the invitees, and the enraged king sends avenging troops to kill the murderers and burn their cities. Matthew has clearly turned the simpler story into a more pointed allegory about the rejection by the Temple elite of the messiah – the bridegroom, and the persecution of his followers.

Finding those who refused the invitation unworthy, the king tells his servants to go out onto the street and gather all they can find – “both good and bad” to fill the wedding hall with guests. Matthew adds the story of the guest found without a wedding robe. It may have been the custom that wedding robes were given out to guests (especially those brought in off the streets), but the implication is clear – this guest is tucking into the wine and food but not entering into the true spirit of the feast – Nor, allegorically, has he made proper outward preparation for a new inner life. So, in a phrase added and often used by Matthew, he is cast into outer darkness with much wailing and gnashing of teeth. This

has a vengeful and final air that may sit uncomfortably. In a sermon heard long ago, Perth theologian John Dunnill suggested that

this image comes from Matthew, not Jesus, and is almost the opposite of Jesus' message about the open invitation. But it does, rather crudely, make a point which needs to be made, that if accepting God's invitation brings life, refusing God's invitation brings – less than life. There is a cost to refusing God's offer, not because God is piqued and wants us to suffer, but because we need the life God longs to give us, if we are to discover fully our own humanity. If we don't, we lose out. We can answer the call to let ourselves be drawn through prayer and loving action deeper into the Divine, or we can refuse it. It is our choice.ⁱ

Matthew's final coda "For many are called, but few are chosen" also seems counter to Jesus' open invitation but might perhaps be explained as Revd. Sue suggests, as "all are chosen by God the Creator and God as host of the banquet but not all of us claim our status as chosen."ⁱⁱ The prevailing message of the gospel – is that we all have an invitation and a choice to attend the banquet, and put on a robe provided by the king (no excuse of having nothing to wear!) This robe is not a symbol of conformity but a symbol of taking something upon ourselves. As Revd. Sue notes, Paul often uses the imagery of clothing: "In Galatians (3:26-27) he says that having been baptised we are to be "clothed in Christ" as a description of our union with Christ. In Romans (13:14) Paul says we are to "put on Christ". In Ephesians (4:22-23) Paul says that we are to put away our old self and to be renewed in the spirit of our minds "and to clothe ourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." And in Paul's letter to the Colossians (3:5-14) he is quite detailed about the attitudes in which we are to be clothed: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience ...above all, clothe yourselves with love ..."ⁱⁱⁱ

In today's reading from Paul's letter to his beloved community in Philippi there is a wonderful encouragement to make this choice and put on this robe – to work and struggle alongside our brothers and sisters, as did the early Christian women and men he mentions by name - Euodia and Syntyche and Clement, and elsewhere Epaphroditus who delivered aid from the community to Paul in prison.

Robed in Christ, we are invited to do the work of the gospel, gently and prayerfully, thinking upon what is honourable, and bringing healing, justice and love to the world – and to 'keep on' doing it. (Phil. 4.1-9) This is the banquet – the feast – of life to which we are invited. Isaiah says those who "have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat" will be feared by the ruthless of the world, and the Lord will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well matured wines ..." (Isaiah 15.1-9) In reciting Psalm 23 we claim the guidance of the good shepherd beside still waters and in right pathways - and so have a table spread before us in the face of those who trouble us, our heads anointed with oil and our cups filled till they run over.

So, let us stop agonising about whether to go to that party or not – Let us rejoice (and again I will say, rejoice!) with Christ, the bridegroom, and know the peace of God by gladly putting on a wedding robe and joining the love-feast. Amen.

ⁱ Revd. John Dunnill: *17th Sunday after Pentecost* Oct 9 2011, St Paul's Beaconsfield.

ⁱⁱ Revd. Sue Lodge Calvert, *The Wedding Banquet*, Companions on the Way Blog, October 11, 2023. (<https://www.companionsontheway.com/post/the-wedding-banquet>)

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.