

Pentecost 18
12/10/2014

Mark the Evangelist

Psalm 23
Matthew 22:1-14

Well Dressed

Our gospel reading this morning is one messed-up piece of scripture – a dog’s breakfast of a text.

The general story is well known to Christians, although we’re much more familiar with the simpler and certainly less violent version which Luke gives us. In Luke, a feast is prepared, but many excuses are given as to why the invited guests can’t come. The insulted host then sends out to the streets and lanes, and has anyone encountered compelled to come and take the place of the original guests: end of story, with a clear moral – don’t miss the invitation, because your place will easily be filled.

In Matthew it’s much more complicated. The host is a king, and the feast a wedding banquet for his son. But the invited guests don’t simply dismiss the invitation; they mistreat and even kill the servants sent to announce the feast. This much is straightforward, at least. But, notwithstanding that the food is presumably sitting on the kitchen bench about to be served, the enraged king then enters into a small scale war to destroy those evil-doers and their city. He then sends out again into the streets to gather in all they could find, “both the good and the bad”. And finally we have a strange encounter between the king and a guest who has no wedding garment on. It’s strange, because presumably *none* of those who were plucked from the streets were wearing their wedding-best at the time. Yet only this one features as offensive. The dumbstruck guest is then cast out to weep and gnash his teeth. And the text concludes with one of Matthew’s little summarising lines: “for many are called, but few are chosen”

It’s quite a lot to get your head around! Some scholars account for the strangeness of the story by suggesting that here Matthew is weaving together a couple of different stories, retold for reasons and a context quite different from Luke’s account. Now, that makes good sense in terms of accounting for the text as we now have it, but it doesn’t really help us with understanding it as scripture. The historical and critical tools we have for understanding texts these days are only relatively new. Until they were discovered, the church dealt with these difficult passages with their contradictions and all. We *also* have to receive it as having its own authority, apart from how we might explain away its contradictions. What the historical approach allows us to do is to break the text up, explain each of its parts, and effectively *explain away* the difficult parts of the story. But to *explain* the story and its oddities by these means is to render it of no use to us. What we can *explain* is something we *already* know – because we know the things in terms of which we explain it.

The truly *interesting* question is whether or not there are things in the text which we *can’t* easily explain, or which sit somewhat uncomfortably with us. If there are such things, then that thing calls *us* into question. It confronts us with a thought or a fact which our understanding can’t comprehend. And it is only such things which lead us into new realities, new ways of seeing.

Now it's easy, for example, to draw "morals" from the story: take care to respond to God's call when it comes. And when you do accept the invitation, take care to "dress" yourself appropriately by living a life worthy of one called by this God.

But there is no real *gospel* here. This is all law – all *imperative* – do this, don't do that. There is no liberation here except the news that we *are* called, although if it's a calling to do things we don't want to do, then it's hardly good news. The good news of the gospel has to do with Jesus Christ, and so if there's any good news in the mixed up story of the king's banquet, it'll be ours only if we read it christologically – or if we allow it to read *us* christologically. We have to ask: how does the parable speak to us about Jesus Christ, and about us in relation to him? If the story of the king's banquet tells us what the kingdom of heaven is like (22.2), and if Jesus himself is the presence of the kingdom of heaven, how is the story about Jesus and not simply about us as we accept or reject God's invitation? The good *and the bad* are gathered to replace those cast aside. How is this so, christologically? The guest is inappropriately dressed and cannot speak for himself, and is cast out for *that* reason, and not because he is one of the "bad". How is this so, christologically?¹

To read this parable christologically we have to understand that Jesus is both the invitation to the wedding banquet, and the wedding garment the guests are to wear.

The first part – the invitation – probably makes sense to most Christians. We are used to the thought that the kingdom is open to all – to both good and bad. This is more or less our understanding of justification by grace: Jesus is the ticket to heaven, so to speak. Once the original guests refused the invitation, the banquet was thrown open to all, and Christians can understand this being about God's grace in Christ.

But what then about the guest who is thrown out? He got in same way everyone else did – in Christ, by grace, good or bad. And this is just the point. The only answer he need have given to the king's question was just that: I got in without a wedding robe because that was the condition of my invitation. But the confused guest is thrown out because he is speechless and not because he answers wrongly. It is not that he wears no wedding garment, but that he doesn't know that in fact he does; he doesn't know the grace by which he could stand in confidence before the king.

And now we are in range of hearing good news in our strange little story. So often we turn justification by grace into a ticket with an expiry date. And so we imagine that while we get into God's good books by his grace, we *stay* there by *our good works*. We imagine that while we might get into the wedding banquet dressed only in street clothes, once there we have to cobble together something to dress ourselves more respectably, lest our host ask us some uncomfortable questions.

But the grace of God in Christ is not simply the *invitation*, the way *into* God's kingdom. Christ is also our wedding garment, what we are to be wearing when the host greets us in the mingling. This is to say to us, re-imagine how you stand in your calling. Repent, re-think, re-vision, re-view yourself in the world, not as one graciously placed in a

¹ This way of thinking is important, and so we have to understand what it involves. We are, in a sense, stepping away from the words on the page, and looking at them through a particular lens – the confession of Jesus as Lord. If Jesus *is* Lord, then what is the point of this story? Drawing simple morals won't do the trick, because they simply use Jesus as the *authority* of the story – Jesus said, so you better believe it! What we need to ask is this: what does the story itself tell us about Jesus, how does it *make* Jesus Lord for us? "Jesus is Lord" is only the gospel when we already know it to be true; otherwise the phrase is actually a question we've turned into an empty mantra, hoping that it becomes true if we say it often enough.

realm through which you now must work your own way, but as one who continues to stand only by the grace of God. *None of us* wears garments appropriate to the kingdom, save the garment we wear when we put on Christ.

Of course, along the way, there is plenty of time to put a few special stitches into our own ragged outfits. But whether we are good or bad matters less than whether we know what gives us a standing before the king who would ask us how we dare to attend his banquet unadorned. When the question comes, such a king – such a God – is only to be answered according to his own decree:

I stand before you in the wedding robe which is the groom himself: Christ, in whose honour this party is thrown, and for whose honour I was called from my business to be here; Christ, for whose honour this world was created, and into whose image I am being conformed.

May it be so for the people of God. May the Spirit enliven that people in this place and all places to re-discover the invitation to be themselves in the Christ in whose name they are called, and by whose grace they stand.

Amen.
