

Pentecost 19
15/10/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 25:1-9

Psalm 23

Matthew 22:2-14

Well Dressed

Our gospel reading this morning is something of a dog's breakfast of a text. The general story is well known to Christians, although we're much more familiar with the simpler version 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 is rather more complicated. The host is a king, and the feast a wedding banquet for his son. The invited guests don't simply dismiss the invitation (twice); 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 proposing that here Matthew weaves together a couple of different stories, retold this way for reasons and a context quite different from Luke's account. Yet, while that makes good sense in terms of accounting for the text as we now have it, 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 apparent 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 and explain each of its parts. 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. Such things call *us* into question. They confront us with thoughts we don't yet comprehend. It is only such things which lead us into new realities, new ways of seeing.

So 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 possibly the news that we *are* called. If it's a calling to do things we don't want to do, then it's hardly good news.

What *is* the good news? The good news of the gospel has to do with Jesus Christ, and so if there's any good news in this 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?

To answer these questions most succinctly: to read this parable christologically is to see that Jesus is both the invitation to the wedding banquet, and the wedding garment the guests are to wear. What does this mean?

The first part – that Jesus is 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. Once the original guests refused the invitation, the banquet was thrown open to all, and Christians can understand this to be about God's grace in Christ.

But what then about the guest who is thrown out? He gets in the same way everyone else did – in Christ, by grace, good or bad. The typical explanation here is that, having received grace, this chap did not rise to the challenge of decking himself in righteousness by growing in grace with good works. This *is* an important lesson, and it echoes themes in the earlier part of the parable where the invitation is rejected outright. Put differently, and more technically, this sees the parable as being about the importance of growing in *sanctification* after having received *justification*: coming to *look like* a "wedding guest" in good works after having received the gracious invitation.

But, in a specifically *Christian* reading of the parable, we can't just leave the matter there. The separation of an initial justification from the subsequent sanctification is convenient for theology but, probably in direct correlation to that convenience, it is just not going to work. What we end up doing is turning justification by grace into a ticket with an *expiry* date such that, while we *get into* God's good books by his grace, we *stay* there by our good works. (Recall here the problem we met a couple of weeks ago in the parable of the workers in the vineyard). 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 about our attire.

But this, in fact, is not how we order our lives as church. We gather each week not to compare moral achievements but to be lifted up, once again: once again to be invited to the wedding feast. This is named in our opening prayers and hymns. Each week we hear afresh that God knows us more deeply than we know ourselves, and loves us nonetheless. This is named in the preaching, the confession and the declaration of forgiveness. Each week we hear that even the breaking of the body of God *by* us is made – by grace – a breaking of God *for* us. Each week we gather *as we are* around a

table abundant with symbols which speak the extraordinary thing we are going *to become*: Christ's very Body. All of this contradicts any simple notion of an initial justification followed by a life of sanctification. If sanctification *is* something into which we are growing, then it is a very strange growth indeed. For what we grow into – if it is *grace* – is an increasing awareness of our ongoing need of justification, of our need of being set right again despite having heard the gospel a thousand times before. *Our holiness increases with our increasing awareness of our need for mercy.* In terms of the parable, our growing in grace is a growing in awareness of just how poorly we are dressed for *this* wedding reception.

Of course, there is much to be said for trying to put a special stitches into our ragged outfits. Even on our own we can do better than fig leaves. 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 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.

The grace of God in Christ is not simply the *invitation*, the way *into* God's kingdom. Christ is also our wedding garment – our way of eating and drinking and laughing and dancing our way through the celebration – what we are to be wearing when our host greets us in the mingling. The confused guest in the parable is thrown out not because he answers wrongly but because he is struck dumb with fear. 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. For *none of us* wears garments appropriate to the kingdom, save the garment we wear when we put on Christ. In Christ we are always well-dressed.

So then, may the Spirit of this Christ enliven the people in this place and all places to hear again the invitation of God: be yourselves in the Christ in whose name you are called, and by whose grace you stand.

And for the boundless grace in this invitation, all praise and honour be to God, now and always. Amen.

Amen.

[This is an extension of an earlier text distributed but not actually preached at MtE]