

Year A, Proper 23, 15 October 2023

Isaiah 25.1-9; Psalm 23; Philippians 4.1-9; Matthew 22.1-14

From Thursday to Saturday of this week I was in Bucharest, the capital of Romania for this year's archdeaconry synod. The other Christ Church delegates with Robert are still there and will make their way home later today. I mention the synod because I want to begin by sharing a brief summary of an address to the synod by a diplomat to Romania on Romania who drew a positive, encouraging and heartfelt assessment of Romania's progress since the end of the Communist era under Nicolae Ceaușescu. The diplomat made an important point, which might serve us well in aspects of our own lives. Today's Romanian on the whole sees how far they lag behind Western nation states, rather than seeing how far they have come. His assessment of the progress made was so encouraging that the secretary of the Prime Minister on one occasion came up to him saying that was inspiring!

The diplomat's comments on the Romanian Orthodox Church were less sympathetic. Being of a western mindset he was critical of Orthodoxy and in particular its emphasis on living in this world fully aware that this life for the Christian is set within a greater reality, a divine reality. Our Western perspective coloured by what is called materialism places the perspective so firmly on the here and now we are in danger of failing to give sufficient attention and in many cases no attention to the things eternal. Paul writes, "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." (1 Corinthians 15:19)

The above is meant to serve as a way into appreciating Jesus' parable of the wedding banquet. What is the point of the parable? A parable that is meant to disturb us. Possibly given to make us feel a little less sure of ourselves? We call to mind the introduction to the parable. Matthew writes, "Once more Jesus spoke to the chief priests and the elders of the people." And Jesus continues as he does throughout Matthew's gospel to tell those with ears to listen what the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God is like.

For Jesus the kingdom of heaven is a reality of which he can speak with an authority that is not like that of the scribes and the Pharisees. People ask, where does he get his authority? The implication is that Jesus' authority is of God. Last week we heard how the chief priests and the elders of the people heard the parables as being directed against them as Jesus speaks to them about the kingdom of heaven. (Mt. 21.45). Over five chapters in Matthew's gospel after Jesus enters Jerusalem the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities intensifies. A conflict that leads to people beginning to plot against him and his betrayal, his passion and his death.

The thrust of Matthew's gospel is to remind us that with Jesus the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God has drawn near. It is reality. The wedding banquet prepared for a son is ready. It is evident who is in and who is out. You can self-test. Are you willing and ready to pay the debt owed as in last week's parable of the landowner and the tenants? Are you willing and ready to accept the invitation to the wedding banquet? Last week we considered Isaiah's word picture of a wine garden in which vines were planted that only yielded wild grapes. This is in contrast to God's call to his people to be a vineyard where grapes are cultivated worthy of repentance. The imagery of today's parable like last week's parable is set against the backdrop of the first century economic and social realities of the Mediterranean world.

A king having prepared everything to host a wedding banquet for his son reminds those already invited via his slaves to attend the wedding banquet, to which no one responds. The invitation is repeated. It is sent out again. This time with a clarifying message. Once again those invited do not respond. We are told they make light of the invitation each going about their work one to his farm and another to his business. Lucille in preparation for KidsChurch was reminded of a classic Sunday school song – the refrain. Some here I am sure remember it.

I cannot come,
I cannot come to the banquet,
Don't trouble me now,
I have married a wife,
I have bought me a cow,
I have fields and commitments,
That cost a pretty sum,
Pray hold me excused
I cannot come.

The final stanza of this Sunday school song ends as follows,

Now God has written a lesson
For the rest of mankind:
If we are slow in responding
He may leave us behind.
He is preparing a banquet
For that great and glorious day,

When the Lord and Master calls us
be certain not to say: I cannot come.

More disturbing for us as we hear this and last week's parable is the violence we encounter in the parables. The world as we are reminded daily of its conflicts is a harsh place. Think of Hamas and the massacre of young Israelis only a good week ago or earlier only a few weeks ago Armenians felling Nagorno-Karabakh or earlier the militaries taken control of nations states in Sahel region and all this against the backdrop of the conflict in the Ukraine. The parables do not mask this worldly reality. As in last week's parable we encounter violence. The slaves are maltreated and killed, but this time in contrast to last week's parable the king avenges their maltreatment with their death. "He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city." Those who committed gratuitous and inexcusable violence do not go unpunished.

What is important is that the king will not be deterred. The wedding banquet prepared for a son is ready. We are told those initially invited were not found worthy. Why? According to the parable it is their unresponsiveness and their readiness to ignore, maltreat and kill those whom the king has sent.

The structure of today's parable is in some ways similar to the one we heard last week concerning the Labourers in the Vineyard in that both the owner of the vineyard and the king, the host of the wedding banquet are not deterred. The landowner and the king act believing in both cases that the people will come to their senses. Their stubborn hearts will not prevail. The invitation to pay the debt owed and the invitation to attend the wedding bank are repeated in one case to finally settle the debt owed and in today's parable to accept the invitation and not to ignore it or take it lightly.

Last week the preacher reminded us that our response matters and that divine judgement is real. It is not to be taken lightly. Similarly the invitation to become a member of the kingdom of heaven is real. The wedding banquet is ready one can partake. All has been prepared, but all those invited must still respond, accept the invitation to be clothed in Christ.

In the gospels there is always an urgency to act and not to delay, because life matters. Today matters. The invitation to confess our sins matters. The invitation to affirm a declaration of our Christian faith matters. The invitation to join in the Lord's Supper a foretaste of the heavenly banquets matters, as we prepare ourselves daily for life eternal in the now. It matters. The invitation at the end of the service equipped by responding to the various invitations made throughout the service matters, "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. In the name of Christ," as we give ourselves to the things eternal in our today for the sake of God's kingdom. **Amen.**