

Sunday, October 11th. 2020. Trinity 18

Isaiah 25, 1-9, Psalm 23, Matthew 22, 1-14

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In August, I had to take a wedding at Stewkley, when, owing to the restrictions, there was a limit of 30 people. I am conducting another wedding in November, this time at Soulbury, when there will be a limit of 15. For both couples it is really hard to decide who to invite and who to leave out.

If you are trying to organise a celebration for an important event, such as a significant birthday or a wedding in the family, it's jolly annoying if people don't accept the invitation, especially if you suspect that they have something better to do than come to your event, rather than a genuine reason, such as having to be away abroad on business or illness. It's even more irritating if they accept the invitation in the first place and then back out, and totally infuriating if they say that they are coming and then fail to turn up! Your celebration risks being spoilt.

The parable in today's Gospel is about an occasion like this. It is about God's preparation for a time of joy, described with the picture of a king organising a wedding banquet for his son. But some, having initially accepted the invitation to attend, are backing out.

Jesus is addressing the parable to the chief priests and Pharisees, and he is in the temple. It takes place just after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem in the previous chapter and the cleansing of the temple, when Jesus threw out the moneychangers and accused the religious authorities of turning God's house into a den of thieves.

The bit about the king sending his troops and burning their city probably refers to the coming of the Roman army, which was seen as God's instrument of judgement on Israel, and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD, the Israelites being seen as having strayed away from God, having become disobedient and failing to keep their promise as the people of God.

So, Jesus is making it clear that those in authority have got it wrong. They should know that God made a covenant with his people in the Old Testament, and that they made promises to one another. But Israel has gone back on that promise. The religious authorities have turned away from God's invitation, have introduced strict rules, which other people have difficulty in following. Rather than recognising God's Son and rejoicing in God's invitation, they have been too busy doing other things.

So, the invitation is extended to others, to all people, just as Jesus welcomed all people, and Paul spread the Gospel beyond the limits of Israel to the Gentiles.

Today, we are invited to share the bread and the wine of the Eucharist, and we are called by God to respond, 'to live and work to his praise and glory.' In the last part of the parable, the man, who comes without a wedding garment, is unprepared and doesn't respond.

The reading from Isaiah begins with a psalm of praise for God's victory. The aliens, that is, those who are presumptuous, are brought down, and the poor and needy, the afflicted people of God, are protected. A similar idea is expressed in the Magnificat, 'He has cast down the mighty from their thrones: and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he has sent away empty.'

Then, there is a picture of a feast, when the hostile power is overthrown, and the response will be one of faith and rejoicing at God's saving love.

So, we, too, are asked to respond to God's invitation. Jesus stressed the need to love God and our neighbour, rules being less important than relationships. All we need to do is to keep our promise. At our baptism and confirmation, promises are made that we will renounce evil and follow the way of Jesus Christ. So, we have to be careful not to let anything prevent us from accepting that invitation, and to make God our priority, whoever we are.

The great Psalm 23 expresses that confidence, 'The Lord is my shepherd; therefore can I lack nothing.' It is about a worshipper, grateful for deliverance from enemies and dangers, who comes to make a thank offering in the temple. But the way is dangerous. God, the shepherd, guides him by the right paths to nourishment and rest, and if the way leads through a steep and dangerous place, the sheep fears neither pitfalls nor enemies, as God the shepherd is there to protect him. 'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me.'

Finally, God becomes the host, providing for his guests with lavish generosity ('my cup shall be full'), and God's protecting presence will be with the worshipper for the rest of his life and for evermore. 'Surely goodness and loving mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.'

That is the promise, and all God asks is that we accept that invitation, respond, keep the promise and remain faithful. We often sing this hymn:

O Jesus, thou hast promised.
to all who follow thee.
that where thou art in glory
there shall thy servant be;
and, Jesus, I have promised
to serve thee to the end;
O give me grace to follow,
my Master and my friend.

Like the psalmist in Psalm 23, we can be confident that God, with his steadfast love, will always keep his promise.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.