

Holy Trinity Sunningdale
Sunday, October 15, 2023
Readings – Psalm 23 & Matthew 22:1-14

It is easy to link the two readings for today – Psalm 23 and Matthew 22:1-14. They are both about the abundant provision of God the Creator for all his creations. Psalm 23 is many people's most comforting Psalm and from verse 1 to the end, the psalmist illustrates how the shepherd-God supplies abundantly all that his trusting people need. In verse 5, God assumes the role of host, while the trusting follower sits as honoured guest at his table. To sit at God's table is to enjoy fellowship and communion with him. To do so "in the presence of my enemies" is to have one's special relationship to God declared publicly in a context of divine blessing and security.

Our reading from Matthew is a story Jesus told the religious leaders about the kingdom of heaven. In this story, we see that God has made abundant provision for his people. Unlike Psalm 23, the king in this story, invited his guests a couple of times, and each time they rejected his invitation.

In the culture of those days, two invitations were expected when banquets were given. The first asked the guests to attend and the second announced that all was ready. We can relate to this in the form of someone sending you a first invitation to save the date and then a second invitation with more details of the event nearer the date. Unlike today, attendance at weddings was a social obligation in Palestinian Judaism. By refusing to come, the guests deliberately insult the dignity of the king who has counted on their attendance and graciously prepared food for them. For all the invited guests to refuse to come would greatly shame the host – their unanimous refusal with the absurd excuses given, definitely must be a plan to deliberately insult the host. As a king, this is a traumatic breach of social order, an act of rebellion. The king can only salvage some honour by punishing those who have insulted his kindness. Although it might be difficult for us to imagine King Charles reacting with such rage and violence, Jesus' audience could envisage a king avenging his honour by executing those who have scorned his invitation. Of course, we must remember that this is a story as it is unrealistic to suppose that the king would engage in a military expedition while his banquet food gets cold, but the people listening to Jesus would naturally applaud the king's rage as the right climax to the story to show the horrible fate of the disobedient and proud. This story is an illustration that the arrogant often ignores God and how God seeks the lowly of this world who will humbly acknowledge his reign.

Although vengeance restores some of the king's honour, but to recoup it more fully, the king must invite other guests who will accept his invitation even if they are of much lower status than the first set of invitees. The matter is urgent, otherwise the freshly prepared food will spoil. Many commentators believe that those gathered from outside the destroyed city represent the Gentiles. The welcoming of both good and bad echoes Jesus' mission to sinners, but we are also reminded that grace not only forgives but also transforms. All are welcome, but no one dares remain the way he or she enters.

Once the newly invited guests have begun to dine, the host enters as was customary in those days. Some commentators think that it was customary for wedding guests to be given wedding clothes to wear to the banquet and it was unthinkable to refuse to wear these clothes. But wedding clothes may simply refer to clean garments as opposed to soiled or dirty ones. Most of us will buy new clothes to attend a wedding.

To come to a wedding in soiled and tattered garments would insult the host and this particular host was in no mood to be further insulted. This man with his dirty clothes, like the first set of guests, has responded with an insult.

Two lessons come from this story.

1. God wants us to join him at his banquet. That is why he sends us invitations again and again. Jesus says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." Have you and I accepted his invitation?
2. The wedding clothes represent the righteousness needed to enter God's presence and his kingdom. Christ has provided these clothes of righteousness for everyone, but each person must choose to put them on in order to enter the king's banquet. Our salvation is by grace – free, but our discipleship requires a response. There is an open invitation, but we must be ready. Am I ready? Are you ready? Today, God invites us to sit at his table. Let us open our hearts so he can enter in. Amen.

Dolapo Ogunbawo