

Many are invited, few are chosen

Revd. Jon Hutchinson, 11 October 2020

You probably won't be that surprised to discover that I wasn't very well behaved at school. If the teacher was telling someone off for talking or messing about, it was usually me.

So it came as quite a pleasurable relief on those few occasions when the teachers wrath was focussed on someone else and I could sit there quite smug for being good.

On those rare days when I had actually done my homework, paid attention and got on with the work I quite liked hearing someone else get in trouble.

This comes to mind because the scripture reading today comes as the last of three parables in the temple directed at the Jewish religious leaders (pause) although there is a sting in the tail – so don't get too comfortable. Our reading has 2 parables – one morphing into the next, with a curious extra verse – but the opening story is directed at the Jewish religious leaders.

There are 47 parables in all and the dominant theme is what the kingdom of heaven is like. One thing the parables make clear is that access to God's kingdom cannot be taken for granted.

Jesus told these parables on different occasions AND with different emphasis so today's parable is also found in Luke chapter 14 however the Gospel writers had a different audience in mind and Matthew in particular is writing to a Jewish audience to plead with them not to ignore or abandon their heritage of being God's chosen people.

In the first part of the parable, the King is God the Father, his Son is Jesus the Messiah and the invited guests are God's own people. Their refusal to come to the banquet is a thinly veiled criticism that they refused to recognise Jesus as God's chosen one.

It wasn't enough just to have the invite to the party...you needed to respond when the party was announced. That is a question of faithfulness – God's and his people.

Now I know some church members have been to a garden party at Buckingham Palace. I'm sure the invite is a handsome item and it might well become a keepsake, but the point is the actual party.

The very people God had entered into a relationship with to demonstrate to the world how good it can be to live within God's favour, refused to recognise His Son and to come to the party. Needless to say the King is angry. Verse 7 says...

⁷The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

Now there is almost universal agreement that verse 7 was added later to root the parable in the actual outcome of Jerusalem being destroyed and burned in AD70.

You can decide on that for yourself as much as anyone else either way these words are sobering...parables are not just interesting stories ...but stories showing us that the kingdom of God, our response to God's invitation and the outworking of our relationship with God is **the** issue to which we should pay attention. NOT – your fields and your business!

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SO – God bypasses those who refuse and his servants have permission to go out and bring in anyone and everyone.

This demonstrates to us – if we needed it – that God longs for all people everywhere to come to his banquet...his Kingdom is portrayed as being like a wedding banquet a place of feasting and joy and excitement. However, verses 10-14 prevent us from misunderstanding this universal invitation.

The servants went out and brought in everybody the good and the bad. Like the parable of the wheat and the weeds – all mixed in together.

There are those with a Universalist theology who believe that God's love is SO great and his mercy SO generous that none will be lost. It's a very attractive idea – but it doesn't tie in with what Jesus actually says.

There was a tradition of offering wedding guests robes to wear in order to be suitably dressed for a grand occasion. As the King surveys his full banquet he sees a guest who is not in wedding attire.

Friend he says – how did you get in here without wedding clothes. The man has no answer.

The King orders him to be bound, thrown out into darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth and one of these days I will explore with you what that is all about – it crops up in quite a few of our 47 parables!!!

The point being made – and this is the sting in the tail for those feeling a little smug – is that God's invitation to experience his grace and forgiveness require a response.

Not just to attend BUT the clothing is Christ and the evidence is a transformed life and fruitfulness.

The good news is that the kingdom of God will include the most astonishing range of people – in scripture terms all the bad folk like the poor old tax collectors who get a bad press, HOWEVER it was these unlikely people who responded to the call from John the Baptist to repent. They heard the invitation, they took it and the evidence of transformation was there – like Zacchaeus.

This idea of clothing as an illustration is used in Colossians chapter 3 – for example verse 12

¹² Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

These are the garments the King expects to see on those who respond to his invitation.

So – we have responded to the invitation and we are glad to be guests at the banquet but we cannot become complacent or arrogant to think that we have done enough.

V 14. Many are invited, few are chosen.

Our responsibility is that on-going transformation and fruitfulness, not through striving, but simply openness to the Spirit and a desire to return the love shown to us in Jesus Christ.

Let us pray.