

Pentecost 18 – St Aidan’s – 12th October 2014

Reading: Matthew 22:1-14

Theme: ‘Choosing to accept the invitation’

Text: “Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.” Matthew 22: 9

Introduction

For all who have been involved in weddings they are a stressful time. Everyone who decides to get married wants the perfect wedding. Of course there is no such thing but couples and families put huge pressure on themselves to have the best occasion they can have. As a minister I have been involved in hundreds of weddings and seen the stress of such occasions as well as witnessing some very interesting moments. Imagine a wedding where all the guests declined to come! I have a family wedding in a few weeks’ time in Adelaide. Annette’s sister’s eldest girl is being married and we, along with the wider family, are looking forward to celebrating the occasion together. I can’t imagine saying “No, we cannot come to the wedding as it is not a priority in our lives.” The family ‘fall-out’ would be horrendous. As many people know through their own experiences, weddings are up there with the stressors of death, birth, new jobs, retirement, to mention but a few of the critical points in our lives.

However, Jesus’ parable here is about the decisions in life that we make concerning faith matters and/or the lack of priority we have in these matters, which is becoming increasingly evident in our busy humanistic, worldly society. Hence this parable certainly still has meaning in our context today, which is quite different to the context into which Jesus spoke it.

Let us look at the parable of ‘The wedding banquet’ in Matthew 22:1-14

This parable is the last of three by which Jesus engages the temple authorities. They have confronted him about his authority (21:23-27) and he responds with a series of stories that challenges them rhetorically but he makes his point very clearly. The parable for today holds the prospect of fierce and final judgement for all in tension with the possibility of outlandishly inclusive grace for all.

Matthew’s story is an allegorized rendering of the ‘banquet invitation’ God extends to Israel. The invitation was rejected. Prophets were sent and they were rejected; Jesus was sent and he was killed. In Matthew’s telling there is the foretelling of the sacking of Jerusalem in 70AD by the Romans which is seen as retribution for an ungrateful response by the people that dishonours the Lord’s generous invitation.

As with the previous parable (21:33-46) the listeners will realise that the king is God, the initial invitees are Israel and the rejected servants are the prophets (including Jesus). This will make them most uneasy listening to this parable as again the authorities know that in ‘parable form’ Jesus is giving them a warning about their faithlessness. Not easy for them to hear.

Secondly, the parable is giving new openness to all to be called ‘the children of God’ and not simply to Israel. This for the authorities was blasphemy as Jesus was opening up the ‘grace of God’ to all.

I love the verse:

“So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.”

Matthew 22:10

All were welcomed, no matter their background. God’s openness to all was shown.

However, there is ‘a sting in the tail’ of this parable that is not always understood. It seems as if the king is incredibly harsh to one person who was not wearing the ‘right clothes’. However, we need to understand that the king has given out the correct clothes to all to wear to this special occasion and one person has chosen, for whatever reason, not to wear what is required by the king. The punishment is immediate and the individual is thrown out. For Matthew, ethics are paramount and here Jesus’ teaching is clear. If a person receives unmerited grace and does not respond with humility, compassion, kindness and gratitude, that person is judged just as those who begged off the invitation. In truth, it may be that an ungrateful life is its own judgement – an ‘outer darkness’ that is desperately lonely and devoid of joy.

The final line of the parable also causes issues.

“For many are invited, but few are chosen.” Matthew 22: 14

This does not mean that God chooses arbitrarily. We have free choice. The invitation must be accepted, followed by appropriate conduct. Proper behaviour is evidence of being chosen. This is the outworking of the choice we make to be faithful to God and what God calls us to be in the way we live our lives. The man not wearing the wedding clothes had accepted the invitation but not followed the protocols expected and thus was ejected from the wedding banquet.

Teaching for today

This parable is rich in its teaching for us.

1. Firstly, we are reminded that the kingdom of heaven is open to all – all are invited to the wedding banquet – to share in God’s kingdom.
2. Many make excuses and do not attend the wedding banquet so others are invited.
3. As we accept the invitation it comes with a commitment not only to attend but to conduct ourselves in a certain way.
4. If we do not conduct ourselves in a way that is correct by God’s standards, then we have to expect the consequences of our actions.
5. Hence, this is a call to faithfulness in following Jesus as our Lord and our Saviour and our lives need to reflect that.
6. The choices we make affect all aspects of our life – for better or worse and God allows those choices but be aware of the consequences of wrong decision making in God’s sight.

The message of Matthew is that God’s intervention in Jesus is at once broadly inclusive and utterly decisive. The wedding invitation has gone out. The question is not whether we can manage to fit the party into our schedule. This is the invitation that changes our schedule and our life. We are invited, we accept and then live our lives as Christ’s disciples, revealing Christ in all aspects of our living. In a moment we share communion, part of God’s banquet for us revealed by Jesus. This ‘love meal’ we are to share in a moment. Use this time to reflect on your choosing God’s invitation and what that has meant to your life.

Let us pray

God of all people, you have lovingly invited all of us to become members of your realm. You suffered to prepare a place for all of us at your table. You have gone to extraordinary lengths to be sure that everyone, good and bad, is on your guest list.

Thus we pray that by your grace you would enable us, when you come into our lives, to hear your voice, to respond to your call, and to live courageously as your disciples. Then, having received the gracious invitation to your banquet, help us go forth and invite others to come to your great feast. Amen.