

Matthew 22.1-14

Wesley Uniting Church, 15 October 2017

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I'd like to talk this morning about the reading we have heard from Matthew's Gospel, a parable which is usually given the title 'The parable of the king's wedding banquet'. It is best understood if we first set the scene.

1.

Jesus has come down from the north of Palestine and has entered the great city of his place and time – Jerusalem. His arrival aroused the Passover crowd (Matthew 21.8-9). Jerusalem's population was normally around 80,000 yet it increased four or five-fold for the week of Passover. Think of the great festivals in the great cities of our day and you will have the right kind of street scenes in mind. The crowd placed palm branches in front of Jesus as he rode a donkey through the city gates. No one in the crowd will have missed the significance of the donkey. They knew their scriptures, and they knew Zechariah chapter 9, verse 9: 'Shout aloud, O daughter of Zion! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and glorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey'. Has Jesus of Nazareth come as a challenger to the powers that be?

2.

Having entered the great city of his day, Jesus then entered the great monument to religion of his day – the Jerusalem Temple. The Temple was an enormous structure, with many precincts and many courts. We have an enormous structure with many precincts and courts just up the road here on Capitol Hill. It provides some help for our collective imagination, but its splendour is dwarfed by comparison to the Temple Mount. Jesus strode into the Jerusalem Temple and, in the forecourts where animals were sold for ritual sacrifice, he threw over the tables, called the vendors a den of criminals, and drove them out with a whip. The manner of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem certainly excited the crowds. The manner of his entry into the temple seriously provoked the religious authorities. And so at chapter Matthew 21 verse 3, not long before today's readings, we hear '... the chief priests and the elders of the people came to [Jesus] ... and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"'

3.

Trying to imagine the exchange that followed is intriguing. We have Jesus, the new champion of the people; we have the temple authorities, the guardians of the status quo who have just witnessed Jesus create an uproar in the Temple courts; and we have a spell-bound audience. Enter today's reading. Bear in mind that if Jesus were to answer the chief priests that his authority came from God he could be executed for blasphemy. He had to find a more clever way to engage them, and the crowd. His solution was to tell a story. He in fact told three during this exchange, but we have heard just one of them today: the parable of the king's wedding banquet – a banquet which, ultimately, included only people from the streets and did not include any of those who were the first to be invited. It is a story about an astonishing reversal of entitlement.

4.

To understand what Jesus is saying in this parable we need, first of all, to clear away something that Matthew seems to wish Jesus had said. There are three different versions of this parable. The others are in Luke's Gospel (Luke 14:16-24) and the Gospel of Thomas, a very early yet non-canonical Gospel. Of the three, only Matthew includes the scene where the king destroys the city (verses 6-7; almost certainly a reference to Rome's destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD), and only Matthew includes a final scene (verses 11-14) where the king, once the banquet finally does get underway, throws out one of the guests because he is not properly dressed. There are other differences, however, the really troublesome one is this new ending. Not only is the guest thrown out - he is cast out into an outer darkness of wailing and gnashing teeth. You will recall that the king, in a last ditch effort to find anyone willing to attend his banquet, had sent his servants to gather the people from the streets. Where on earth could a poor guest from the streets purchase a wedding coat, with no time and no money to do so? If the king is to be understood as a symbol for God, as the king undoubtedly is, what are we to make of that harsh act? Is God really like that?

5.

God is not like that. But religious rivalries can make us wish that God was like that, and they can make us wish that God did things like that. More than any of the other Gospel writers, Matthew exhibits a deep concern about what he feels is wrong teaching in the early church, and that concern has found its way into his retelling of the story. Remember these gospels are not written at the time of Jesus. They are written forty to sixty years later. And so some of the dramas and disputes of the early church have, unsurprisingly, found their way into the narratives. The final scene in Matthew's version of the parable is really about the church. Matthew is convinced that among those who did end up accepting the king's invitation, some bad characters have got through security - so to speak. Matthew's view is: Get rid of them. Matthew feels that some who are sitting at God's table (the church) are not fit to be there. So he alone has added the final scene where one guest is ejected into fires and gnashing of teeth which, again, is a typical imagine of Matthew. These additions are Matthew's colouring of the story. If we take time to understand them, we can get back to the core of the parable as it was told by Jesus. Or, we can at least get as close as we can.

6.

So, what might have been the original version of the parable? Both Matthew and Luke contain the core, and so does Thomas.

A man sent out many invitations for people to attend a very special banquet. When the day came, that man sent his servant out to announce that the feast was ready and that all may now come and dine. But all of those originally invited had made other plans, or they had excuses. When the servant reported this to his master, the master said 'Go out into the towns and bring back all those whom you happen to meet in the streets and the lanes, so that they may dine, and my house may be filled with them instead.' (see Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*).

7.

Can you imagine the reaction of the people listening to this exchange between Jesus and the chief priests in the Temple courts? With the Temple authorities in front of him – the 'first invited' - and

the crowds surrounding them – the people from the street - Jesus tells a story with an unmistakable message ...

By what authority am I doing these things? ... Let me tell you about a king who invited his people to a banquet, but those who were given the first place occupied themselves with less important things, so he invited the ones they had considered unworthy ...

Can you imagine the reaction of the chief priests? Sadly we have an indication of it here. Jesus, in coming down from northern Palestine, had not only entered the great city – Jerusalem – and the great monument to religion – the Temple – he had also entered the last week of his life.

8.

One brief story to finish. A true story about someone I think would have understood Jesus, which I heard 12 years ago, told by the UCA's Rev Terence Corkin about a Bishop of the Church of South India. The Church of South India was formed in 1947, and was intended to be a church uniting all Indian Christians following the end of British rule. The new church was confronted by a divisive issue. Its membership inevitably reflected the caste system – a system with which we are all familiar. Within the new church there were both the Brahmins and the Untouchables – or Dalet people, as now known. The Brahmins would prefer not to be found in the same place as the Untouchables, let alone sharing the same pews, the same communion bread and the same communion cup. So divisive was this issue that, in the early stages, consideration was given to splitting into two churches.

The Bishop was visiting a major regional congregation on a Sunday morning to lead worship and to preach. His sermon was a moving message about the reconciling power of God based on Colossians chapter 1: "For in [Jesus] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things." At the sermons' conclusion, and following the hymn, the Bishop moved to the Lord's table, in order to preside at Holy Communion. When the prayers had been offered, and the bread had been broken, he invited the congregation to come forward.

But nobody came. The bishop waited, and waited, but still nobody came. And then an elegantly dressed gentleman, an elderly Brahmin, rose from his seat and started walking out of the church. By the time he reached the last pew, the eyes of the entire congregation were fixed upon him. With only a few steps left to the door, the Brahmin stopped at the last pew, took a man who was sitting in that pew by the hand, and lifted him up from his seat. The man was poorly dressed, and was an Untouchable. Together, at the Brahmin's leading, the two men walked hand in hand to the front of the church, moved up the steps to the table, and stood before the Bishop. The Brahmin explained to the Bishop that he was a senior government official who had worshipped in that church all his life. And, pointing to the so-called Untouchable standing beside him, he also explained to the Bishop that, while he had not seen this man in the church before, he knew him to be the person who cleaned his office every night after he went home. "We will take communion", the Brahmin said, "but only if you will serve my friend here first".