

Wheatley United Reformed Church  
Sunday 15 October 2017 – Year A  
Isaiah 25.1-9, Psalm 23, Phil.4.1-9. Matt.22.1-14

Why context matters

Every now and again you come across a passage in the Gospels and you think, hang on a moment, this is not the Jesus I know and admire. Like today. What's all this about destroying and burning people who answer no to a wedding invitation? And why is one of the guests who's just been brought in off the streets banished into the outer darkness with wailing and gnashing of teeth for not wearing the right clothes? Talk about overreaction and unfairness. How on earth do we square this with the Jesus who understands human weakness, stands alongside the excluded, tells us that we must forgive those who have wronged us without limit? So you might well ask, as I did, what's going on here? It plays right into the hands of those who tell us that religion has only ever brought violence and misery to the human race. Even much-maligned Paul sounds like a beacon of reason when he prays that his friends in Philippi may experience the peace of God which passes all understanding.

So I sat down, twiddled my thumbs, and began to think. How do you make any kind of sense of this parable – for that is what Matthew says it is – which is so disturbing. We warm to others – the lost sheep, the prodigal son, the good Samaritan – but this is revenge and punishment out of all proportion. Then I remembered that there's another version of this parable, a more familiar one, in Luke 14. Jesus has been invited to a dinner on the Sabbath and heals a sick man, which causes some adverse comment, because you're not supposed to work on the Lord's Day. So he tells the other guests a parable about a wedding-feast at which everyone tries to hog the best seats, proposing instead that when you should sit in the lowest place, so that you may be invited up, rather than sent down. If you have a high opinion of yourself you will be humbled, but if you are humble you will be raised. Fair enough, we know that from the Magnificat: 'he has put down the mighty from the thrones and lifted up the humble and meek'. He goes on to tell the gathered company that when they hold a dinner they shouldn't invite their friends and relations or rich neighbours because they'll ask you back; instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind, because they won't

be able to. That's a bit more difficult. The nearest I ever got to it was many years ago in my previous post. I was conscious that I owed dinner invitations to several people I rather dreaded having to entertain because I thought they were rather dull. So I had them all round together, and do you know what? the party went with a real swing and I discovered they weren't boring at all. But that's still a long way from what Jesus is proposing: don't be predictable! do the surprising thing! confound convention and expectation!

In Luke's version of Matthew's dark parable, the various guests invited all make excuses, on the grounds of business responsibilities and family life. Sounds familiar. The host is angry, and tells his servants to go into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. But there are still empty places, so they are told to go out into the country roads and lanes and make people come, so that the house can be full of guests. This is the version we like, even though the words 'compel them to come in' have in the past been used – abused – to justify forcible conversions. There's none of the violence of Matthew: no servants are seized and killed when they take round the invitations, no troops are sent out to destroy the murderers and burn their city, no guest is plucked from the main streets without any time to change into party clothes and then promptly condemned to the outer darkness. Where Luke concludes 'none of those who were invited will taste my dinner' – of course not, since they'd already refused the invitation – Matthew simply has Jesus say 'Many are called, but few are chosen'. That sounds like the worst recipe for an exclusivist religion: we are the elect, you are reprobates; we're going to heaven, you're destined for hell. Another terrible perversion of faith. If you don't believe me, read one of the strangest novels ever written, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, published in 1824, by James Hogg, the Ettrick shepherd. Especially if Scottish Calvinism runs in your veins.

Why is Matthew so different from Luke? Why has he turned a parable about bringing into God's kingdom all kinds of people who had been shut out into so fierce and uncompromising a parable of judgment? Part of the answer is found in where the parable occurs in the overall narrative. Luke's, as I have said, comes in the context of a dinner with a Pharisee at which Jesus is characteristically forthright, insisting that

God's kingdom is not for people like us or for those who think they deserve to be there. It's followed by the parables of the lost sheep and the prodigal son. For Luke, the feasts and festivals of God's kingdom are open to anyone who wants to come, no matter how unimportant they are. God is more concerned with bringing home the one who is lost than with the dozens who think they are fine. And God forgives mistakes, bad mistakes, and throws a party for those who make them when at last they see sense and come home.

But Matthew places the parable during Holy Week, the last week in the life of Jesus. The narrative sequence is therefore quite different. Jesus overturns the tables of the traders in the temple, and that does not go down well with the Establishment. They question him about his authority and he throws a question back about the authority of John the Baptist, which they cannot answer because it's a no-win situation. He tells them two parables about vineyards, the second of which has the tenants kill the owner's son when he comes to collect the produce. Matthew then announces that the religious leaders realized that these parables were aimed at them, so they set about plotting to arrest him. The parable of the wedding-feast follows on from that. So what in Luke is one of several parables about people who are lost or wrong or simply too insignificant to notice entering the kingdom of God is transposed by Matthew into a very different key, one of foreboding and crisis, a few days before Jesus is led out to be crucified.

Why does Matthew do this? Well, in both the parable of the vineyard and in his version of the wedding-feast he is remembering Isaiah 5. There, the vineyard God planted, that is, his beloved people, has not yielded the intended fruits of justice and righteousness but bloodshed and the cries of the downtrodden. So Isaiah imagines the Lord's anger kindled against those who have rejected his teaching: these people who call evil good and good evil, who are wise in their own eyes, who pervert justice by taking bribes and deprive the innocent of their rights. They will be burned up and destroyed. In his controversies with the religious leaders, Jesus characteristically aligns himself with the prophets against those who make religion serve their own ends, not God's. And like the prophets, he warns that unless they mend their ways God will reject them as his people and look elsewhere. For Matthew, that 'elsewhere'

is the infant Christian community, in his case probably largely consisting of Jews who have come to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. The same parable in both Gospels, but turned to very different purposes; though in both cases, following Isaiah, they share a common concern for the victims of an unjust society. Each Gospel-writer has his own theological emphasis written not just into the narrative but the whole shape of the Gospel. We need to recognize that if we are to make any sense of either.

That's all well and good; but what has any of this to do with us and the world we live in? One obvious lesson is that we must read Scripture carefully, not seize on individual verses to prove contentious points. Here, Matthew and Luke are using the same teaching of Jesus but for quite distinct purposes. God has given us minds and we are to use them as we explore the Bible, especially where we find it most difficult. But what are we to make of the angry and violent reaction of God towards those who abuse their position in the vineyard or who refuse to answer his invitation to the feast? We have heard too much of that kind of language in the past, used to justify wars and crusades. We have to remember that in Matthew's version of the parable these words are addressed at those who were supposed to be the custodians of religious truth and who, he insists, have perverted its purpose. This is not the only place where Jesus pronounces judgment on them. It is a consistent element of his ministry. God's will of justice and mercy for all his children is simply too important for him to remain silent when he sees people who are pleased with themselves, exercise power over others, and end up oppressing the very people they are supposed to be serving and helping in the name of God. I don't imagine he'd be any kinder about some of the abuses of power in our own world. To be silent when you should speak out is to collude with evil. It is also very dangerous, as Jesus is about to discover.

There's another clue. In Matthew's version of the parable, after the invited guests have made their excuses and ill-treated the messengers, the king sends his servants out to bring to the feast anyone they can find; both good and bad. That last phrase is not in Luke and it matters. The man who is kicked out for not wearing the right clothes is not being punished for something outside his control. Just as the feast itself is a symbol of God's kingdom, so the garments are also symbolic: the man improperly dressed, we must assume, belongs among the bad, those who have found their way in

and proceed to dishonor the invitation, doing evil, not good. From earliest times it was recognized that the Church was a mixture of good and bad people – wheat and tares together sown, unto joy or sorrow grown, as the harvest hymn based on another parable has it. We all recognize, I hope, that mixture in ourselves, as we try with God's grace to live more and more to the good.

More importantly, when you strip out the elements peculiar to Matthew's version, you find the same insistence that the invitation to feast in the kingdom of God is not for the privileged few who think they have earned their place there. The Reformation put paid to any sense that we could buy our way into heaven by human means. The invitation to the feast is itself a symbol of God's grace, constantly inviting us to leave behind the fears and habits which drag us down and to experience a better, more creative form of living. It worries me sometimes that an invitation which ought to appeal to so many, when there is so much unhappiness and misery in our society, seems to fall on deaf ears. People do not find in the life and worship of Christian communities that freshness and attractiveness which marks the teaching of Jesus, as he reaches out to those who have been led to believe that it's not for them. We do not mean this to be so, but it ought always to be on our agenda. Which leads me to one final observation. In the Gospels, Jesus spends most of the time outdoors, where people are getting on with their lives as best they can. This parable takes place inside, at a dinner. Yet even then Jesus has his sight firmly fixed on the world beyond the walls. To be his followers, so must we.