**MATTHEW 22:1-4 The Wedding Feast**

Some years ago when Jay & I were running our music business, one of our employees from time to time would engage me in long theological discussions. He was a bright fellow and had decided that teaching himself Hebrew would help him better understand the Old Testament. I was impressed by his fervour. Unfortunately though, he didn’t have much of a handle on interpreting or understanding the Bible as a whole. He tended to take it all literally, and so sadly had come to the conclusion that it was too full of contradictions to be credible.

What this man didn’t understand is that the Bible is made up of a series of books, written by different authors over thousands of years, each from within its own cultural context and at times even carrying its own agenda. The unity of the Scriptures is found in what we call the ‘Metanarrative’ – or the ‘Big Picture’ if you like - rather than in individual stories all saying the same thing in the same way.

Just as you would expect eyewitness accounts of the same event to differ somewhat because of the witness’s differing vantage point, so do some of the stories in the Bible, particularly in the Gospels. Today’s parable is a case in point.

The parable we read this morning is found both in Luke and in Matthew. In Luke, the parable is a straightforward story about a banquet. It picks up the same theme that we looked at last week.

You’ll remember last week’s parable was about the wicked tenants killing the landowner’s messengers and then the landowner’s son, so they wouldn’t have to pay the rent. In last week’s parable, Jesus was highlighting how the Jewish people had rejected the prophets, and were now rejecting God’s Son.

In Luke’s parable of the banquet, we have the same theme. The host sends out invitations to his guests, but they all have something better to do, and turn down his invitation. The host is angry, and commands his slaves to go and gather the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.

As there is still room following this second round of invitations, the host then says to his servant ‘*compel* the people to come in.’ In other words, the invitation to the banquet is so important and so mind blowing, that the host wants the servants to make sure that people really understand that they are welcome to come.

As I said, Luke’s account is straightforward, with a very clear message.

However, the same parable in Matthew has been told with Matthew’s particular spin, and that adds a certain strangeness to the story.

Matthew was a devout Jew, and throughout his recording of the Gospel events and stories, he does a bit of editing. He tells the stories from a particularly Jewish perspective, and in such a way that he hopes his Jewish readers will understand how important the message is for them.

And so, in Matthew’s version, the banquet becomes the wedding feast of the King’s son. As in Luke’s version, the initial invitation to come to the feast in is met with rejection. A second invitation to the same people sweetens the deal with descriptions of the elaborate preparations (verse 4) -it’s going to be delicious! Who wouldn’t come to this party? But those invited are unimpressed, and return to business as usual (verse 5).

But then Matthew adds a twist. The servants sent by the king to announce the party are seized, abused, and murdered (verse 6), which is something we don’t find in Luke’s version. So here, Matthew is reiterating the lesson of the previous parable – that the invitees who killed the Kings servants, and the wicked tenants in the previous parable who killed the landowners’ slaves are both pointing to the Jews who rejected and killed the prophets.

Then Matthew becomes quite carried away. In his version of this parable, the King retaliates and the murderers are themselves murdered and their city is burned to the ground!

In Matthew’s world, a burning city would have called to mind Jerusalem’s destruction at the hands of the Romans in 70 CE, interpreted here as God’s judgment on those who rejected the new thing God was doing in Jesus.

It seems Matthew was very conscious of the judgement that would befall the Jews because of their rejection of Jesus, and so he added this terrible warning.

In both versions of the parable, the unexpected invitation to commoners on the main streets points toward the surprising ways the invitation to God’s kingdom banquet is increasingly extended to and embraced by those once considered outsiders.

Then Matthew adds yet another twist: the guy who has the wrong clothes on. This is something else that is not in Luke’s version. The king discovers a guest who doesn’t have the prescribed wedding robe on, and so he is thrown out – most forcibly!

There could be a couple of ways to interpret this, but the one that gels with me is that the wedding garment – a robe which would have been issued to the guests as they entered – represents the robe of righteousness which is given to those who follow Jesus, and the holy living that follows. That would mean that this fellow is someone who is in amongst the believers, but who is perhaps a hanger on, simply going through the motions. He is one who has not truly repented, and therefore has not received the robe of righteousness through being cleansed and forgiven, and whose life does not measure up. It calls to mind Jesus’ words in Matthew 7:21-23

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.”

So Matthew takes a little bit of editorial licence in his telling of the parable, because he so passionately wants his fellow Jews to repent and turn to Jesus.

Regardless of which version of the parable we read, the thread that runs through both of them is this: that God is grieved and even angered when the invitation to come to his banquet – in other words, to become part of his Kingdom - is rejected and ignored. However, he is a God of amazing generosity, and he has extended that invitation to those who are on the outside. *Everyone is invited.*

**Though both Luke and Matthew recorded this parable for their own culture, the story is just as much a parable for our own time. It speaks to us on two levels.**

1. Socially

In Jewish thinking, the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame were outcasts in Jewish society. If you were poor, or if you were disabled in any way, God was punishing you. It was believed that you had done something evil. You were considered a sinner, and therefore, you were avoided.

Yet, we see in this story that God is willing to not only invite, but to accept into his kingdom those who are social outcasts, and those who are considered to be under the judgement of God. In Matthew’s version, the servants are told to go out and round up both ‘the good and the bad’ and invite them to the feast.

If God himself is willing to invite and accept those who are the outcasts of society, what should our own attitude be if such outcasts seek to join our churches?

These days we’re not so bothered by physical disability are we? In fact, the crippled and the blind and the lame are welcomed. We build ramps and special loos, and install hearing loops at great expense (and it would be nice if they worked…) But what about other things which set people apart from mainstream society?

What about those who suffer from mental illness?

In one church I belonged to, there was a lady who was bipolar who liked to attend church. She was difficult, especially when she was off her meds. I recall one time she showed up for our Wednesday morning service wearing jeans & a jumper – but no underwear, which she gleefully informed us about. Then she kept she threatening to take off her jumper. She was loud and difficult to contain. We ended up having to call the mental health crisis team. The Wednesday morning congregation found that all quite confronting. As we all would. Yet I believe this parable encourages us to put out the welcome mat for all people.

How would we cope if members of the gay community wanted to join our church? Or people whose lifestyles we disapproved of?

This parable offers us a real challenge. If God will accept all comers, then so should we.

1. Personally

Secondly, this parable challenges us at a personal level. How do you feel when you let God down? Or when you let someone you love down, or hurt them in some way? How do you feel when you blow a resolution or promise you have made to God or to yourself? If you are human, you probably feel bad.

As Christians, we know we can come to God and confess our sins and shortcomings, and in faith we know that God has forgiven us. However there can be times when our forgiven-ness doesn’t quite get through to our hearts. We can find it hard to forgive ourselves at times.

This parable reminds us of the unconditional love of God. It reminds us that he accepts us all, no matter who we are or what we’ve done.

So next time you catch yourself failing God or letting down someone you love, or sinning in some other way, remember the unconditional love that enfolds you, and allow it to sink in and dissolve the burden of guilt that you may still be carrying.

Instead of a prayer, I’d like to finish by playing you a song: “Come to the Banquet by Fay White.” – Youtube.