



**Psalm 23**  
**Matthew 22.1-14**  
**11<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

## **A God of Invitation and Feasting**

Perhaps Wedding Invitation printers have been winners this year as couples have gone through the logistical nightmare of changing their plans probably more than once due to The Virus.

My own niece has invited us to her wedding at least twice now. On the original date many of the guests secretly arranged to meet together on Zoom and then invite the unsuspecting couple to join us. In the midst of so much frustration there was still so much happiness in that moment of coming together.

It's now been decided they will get married quietly at the Register Office this month, just with parents present, and then have a celebration with the other 160 guests later when it's safer.

Drawing up a guest list isn't always the most straightforward of tasks for any bride and groom.

Rachel and I had a very public wedding in the large town centre church where I was then serving as Associate Minister. We either had to invite everyone or no one from the congregation. We went for the former, dished out invitations on the steps a month or two before the day but never really knew the exact numbers who'd turn up. It was a headache for the church catering committee, who in the end did brilliantly without the food running out! The church seated a thousand, so it would have been pretty embarrassing if everyone stayed home to watch the football instead. We have to pinch ourselves now as we remember that on the day 800 people came to the feast!

This morning's gospel describes the highs and lows of another wedding feast.

It's a story, and although there are some 'ouch' moments in its telling, at its core is the idea that this King longed for guests to come and share his son's wedding.

We usually decode this parable narrative with the idea of the King being God. The God who invites. The God who opens the doors and desires us to enter as his guests to share in the wedding feast of his son.

Set against the prevailing notions found in ancient religions of how the gods commanded, coerced or cajoled human beings, Matthew's understanding of the God revealed to us in the life and message of Jesus, is of a King who invites but never forces.

The story's tragic part is when, on two occasions, the invitation to a palace celebration is rejected or ignored, replaced instead by just another day at the office or one down on the farm. The recipients are so unimpressed by the occasion they don't even attempt to fill it with alternative festivities, preferring instead the humdrum of routine to the sound of trumpets, confetti and speeches.

Yet, this King just doesn't give up. A second and then a third invitation is issued.

Blend this parable with other stories that describe God in scripture and surely, we end up with the profoundly important idea that God wants us to join in the feast. The doors to the palace are open. We have an invitation and a place is set for us at the table. What we have to do is meet that invitation of welcome with a positive response, walk through the doors and join the feast.

I suspect that, when it comes to organising a celebration, be it at church or home, sharing food together is nearly always an essential. It's just the way we are.

So, it's hardly surprising that for both Jews and Christians a scriptural image of life with God often comes in the form of a feast. James and John ask if they could sit at heaven's top table, the Book of Revelation talks of the Marriage Feast of The Lamb and Jesus asks us to remember him in

bread and wine whilst sharing supper with his disciples.

To share bread together makes us companions, to do that in a spiritual sense with God, characterises us as disciples.

So in today's parable story God's Kingdom is likened to a Royal Wedding Breakfast. The King has been generous with the invitations and now feels a deep sense of rejection when no one turns up.

Matthew depicts this King as becoming angry, destructively so. Many commentators take this to show that in AD70 – about ten years before the gospel was written – when Jerusalem was raised to the ground by The Romans and the Temple destroyed, that some like Matthew, believed this to be the judgement of God.

I guess today many of us would be really uncomfortable interpreting natural disasters, wars, or even this Pandemic, in such a way.

Today's parable story is quite a challenge therefore. Indeed, one commentator I've read has suggested it's probably wise to leave it out of any Sunday School syllabus.

That's because towards the end Matthew once again has a great emphasis on judgement. The sword and fire are used under the orders of an angry king to punish those who've stayed away from the feast.

Whilst many of us would willingly acknowledge there are consequences whenever anyone turns away from the path of love and chooses instead a selfish course, isn't it also the case that, on balance, we want to question any depiction of God's judgement in terms of physical violence.

Interpreting scripture is never easy because the language, cultural references and historic contexts it employed are so far removed from our own times. But, as a rule of thumb I'd be very reluctant to sign up for any interpretation that portrays God as a deity of violence and one who inflicts personal suffering. Which, obviously, brings a certain challenge to this morning's reading.

I sometimes think our picture of God is like putting together a giant jigsaw. There are so many pieces, and some are missing, or simply beyond our reach. People put the jigsaw together differently. For me there are simply so many more pieces that show a God of invitation rather than a deity of violent judgment. It's those pieces, the ones that picture God in terms of a feast giver that I want to piece together now.

A friend, with whom I trained, is now a Regional Minister out in Australia with The Baptist Union of Victoria.

She told me once of a visit she made, on the outskirts of Melbourne, to the only Baptist Monastery in the world. This community grew out of a local church and she was appointed as one of their overseers, she was called their 'Visitor'. One Sunday evening she joined them for a baptism. She described it to me as like no other baptism she'd ever seen.

Unlike ones in church this one took all evening and was followed by a sumptuous feast. The candidate was immersed in water and then bathed in fragrant oils. Everything about the service was lavish and generous without being ostentatious. As it ended rather than coffee and biscuits in the hall, or a bit of ubiquitous church quiche, there was a community meal that prolonged the atmosphere of celebration.

When she spoke to me my friend was still mulling over what all this really meant and said about this rather unusual community on the edge of the city. Her first thoughts were that it revealed their belief in a God of life and generosity and when better than to celebrate God's abundant life made real among us than at a service of Christian baptism.

The Kingdom of God, it isn't a grabbed sandwich eaten between meetings at work, or a meal for one in front of the telly. By using the imagery of a feast, the bible says that life in God's company and service does have those moments of joy, encouragement and warmth that we might associate with the best party celebrations we've ever attended.

I'm probably breaking some cardinal rule here, but in thinking about today's story I wonder, if in its retelling, the characters might behave a little differently, whilst maintaining some of the essence of its meaning.

This idea was prompted in my mind as I listened, on line, to the first of this year's Autumn Lectures from St Martin in Fields recently; a brilliant talk given by the historian Tom Holland. Although he grew up within the Christian tradition Tom Holland is now detached from it. Yet his recent book, *Dominion*, is a masterful critique of why Western Society is, in his view, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, built upon the Christian story. He comes to the conclusion, which I guess saddens many of us in church even though it no longer surprises us, that although a majority in society probably adhere, maybe even without consciously knowing it, to Christian principles they do not sign up to either the language or practice of the Church. Now, we could debate all day what that means, or even if we think it's true.

But, as I was writing this sermon at the same time as listening to this lecture, the thought crossed my mind that if Tom Holland's analysis is correct the story of the King's Banquet would look a little different. We might paint the scene of a great hall with row upon row of people eating the king's food, even benefitting from his hospitality. Yet the one person missing from the feast is the one who has an empty chair at the top table. The king is no longer invited, no longer recognised as the giver of this wonderful meal, no longer honoured as the one who has made all this possible.

Maybe, as never before, part of the mission of the Church is to voice and embody the conviction that there is a connection to be made between a way of love and a God of love, a life of peace and a God of peace. We want to be the sort of guests who long for the king to be at the centre of the banquet because, for us, that makes a good and life giving connection.

For a number of years the Retreat Group I belonged to held a gathering at the Benedictine House at Burford Priory every January. It was the opening of the year, the rooms were cold and there was often a frost on the grass as we made our way to the chapel for morning prayers. The dates would normally be around the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> of January, just before Epiphany. There were figures of the Wise Men on the central staircase, and every night a monk would move them further down so that as the days went by they got closer and closer to the crib on the ground floor.

Sadly, we usually left before the Feast of Epiphany, and then one year our stay coincided with January 6<sup>th</sup>.

We awoke that morning to see that the Wise Men had finally made it, all the way down the staircase to the crib! Lunch was sumptuous and felt like Christmas revisited. Instead of silence there was music, in place of water there was wine and there was a joyful atmosphere in every service held in the chapel. It was a Feast Day.

I hope when the Virus Crisis subsides we will actually, in the beautiful words of one of our oldest members, have a 'knees up', even if I'm not entirely sure what that looks like in a church context!

Yet, until that moment arrives we can live joyfully and thankfully in the presence and with the strength of the God who welcomes us and transforms everyday into a Feast Day celebrating his love among us.

May it be so, in the name of our welcoming and inviting God. Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, 5<sup>th</sup> October 2020*