

Sermon for Sunday 11th October 2026, Year A, Pentecost 20

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

Isaiah 25:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

Sermon

Three years ago, when these readings last came up in the lectionary, we were literally just a few days after the horrific 7th October 2023 attacks by Hamas on Israel, when the whole world was in shock and Israel was just beginning its military response. Before the destruction of large parts of Gaza that followed, our lectionary offered us these words from the 25th chapter of the prophet Isaiah:

“O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the palace of aliens is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt.”

This is a terrifying image, that God might be invoked as the wonderful destroyer of foreign cities, and yet we cannot ignore that this is how God was once understood, a partisan warrior god, who cared only about Israel and who would utterly destroy all her enemies, leaving no one alive.

But this idea of a partisan genocidal God was eventually challenged by the realisation that God had made and therefore loved all peoples; and then, when Israel herself was conquered and destroyed by the Assyrian empire, and Judah by the Babylonian and then Roman empires, they began to realise that God was not a warrior king who would go before them into battle, but an inclusive king of wisdom and compassion and peace, who longed for his people to bless the nations around them, not demolish them.

Even in this harsh reading from Isaiah, we see the shift already coming in verse 6: *“On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for **all** peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines... Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from **all** faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from **all** the earth.”*

Gone is the language of destruction of enemies. Instead, God promises a glorious banquet for *all* nations, wiping away the tears from *all* faces.

This is the imagery that Jesus picks up in his parable about the kingdom of heaven being like a king giving a wedding banquet. In the parable, Jesus cannot help but criticise those who have rejected his inclusive understanding of God’s purpose, in favour of yet more violence. The very guests who were invited to the celebration instead chose either not to participate or even killed the messengers that were sent to invite them. Indeed, Jesus knows that they are even now planning to kill Jesus himself, the Son of God.

Now, Jesus says, God has given up on the leaders and people of high status, who he judged unworthy, and is instead inviting the humblest people, whether good or bad, into the wedding party, to experience God’s grace together.

In the parable, Jesus is partly explaining why so much of his ministry has been among the poorest and outcast Jews, both good people and sinners, while also explaining his increasing willingness to invite non-Jews into God’s kingdom on the exact same basis as the Jews. Being religiously and ethnically pure is no longer the important criterion, what matters is your desire to come and your willingness to accept the invitation of peace.

But why does Jesus add these final few verses into the parable, about a man who gets thrown out of the party because he’s not wearing a wedding robe. What’s all that about? Didn’t he respond to God’s generous invitation? Why is God so mean as to kick out someone he’d only just invited? What does it mean that ‘many are called or invited, but few are chosen?’

As you might expect, theologians have had a field day trying to think through what might be going on here. John Calvin, the famous reformer, pointed out that St Paul frequently encouraged us to be 'clothed with Christ', in other words to be so transformed by our relationship with Jesus that it is as if we look like him in everything we are and do. From that perspective, the unfortunate man is kicked out because he has failed to 'put on the Lord Jesus'. He perhaps wanted to receive the benefits of God's kingdom, without being willing to offer the same to everyone else.

Matthew's gospel has a strong tendency to emphasise that being invited is not enough; you must also respond by doing good works to be worthy of heaven. This is why it's in Matthew's gospel that you find all the parables comparing the sheep and the goats, and the wheat and the tares – all the ways in which Jesus warns his followers that not all who are invited will enter heaven.

I must admit this always makes me uncomfortable. I don't agree with a theology that says you've got to prove you're good enough to get into heaven. I've always preferred the idea that once you've been converted by experiencing God's love, and realised that you're adopted as God's child, then basically you don't ever have to worry about being kicked out or rejected ever again.

It's this unconditional love that transforms people, after all. In my view, people are motivated to do good works and love their neighbours primarily because they have received love from those around them, not because they think they need to chalk up more ticks in the good column to outweigh the bad.

I honestly don't think that the threats of not-being-good-enough have ever been helpful. If you spend a lifetime looking at the world through that lens, you'll just end up full of miserable anxiety and resentment, harshly judging others even as your long-programmed inner critic lectures you for your own infractions. If I'm not good enough, then they're *definitely* not good enough.

I grew up with this all around me. Whatever I did, or achieved, was never good enough. That was the prevailing theme of my childhood. And so, I worked really hard, and got really good at things, but it was still never good enough. And so, I got angry at myself and angry at everyone else, especially my parents.

So, I don't like theology that starts from the perspective that you're not good enough, that you need to do more, try harder, pray more, tick more boxes, to be worthy. It's a perspective that fills many churches, making everyone feel guilty, judgemental and a failure. But I don't believe it's what Jesus was saying.

One of the things that yanked me out of that vicious circle of unworthiness was when, as a novice nun, the sisters at Malling Abbey refused to allow me to do anything for them that I was good at. No computer work, no leading the singing, and so on. The point was, that I had to learn that I had been invited because God and the sisters loved me for being me, not for what I could do.

It was when this clicked for me, that I started being able to do the same, and love others for who they are – beloved children of God – rather than for what they could do for me, and I've come to think of this as the key to being a Christian, to experience and receive unconditional love and then to offer it, to pay it forward. Perhaps it's the key to all religion.

So, I think this is what it means to be wearing a wedding robe at the banquet. The wedding robe doesn't prove that we're worthy of getting into heaven; it proves that we know that our invitation has nothing whatsoever to do with our worthiness, and everything to do with God's unconditional love. It means we've put on Christ. Once we realise this, we are already in heaven with Him.

This is not a god who fights with armies and destroys foreign cities, but the God who wipes away tears from *all* faces, the God who invites *all* people to a banquet. This is the God who weeps for the peace of Israel, and who weeps for the peace of Gaza, and the West Bank, because He loves them all.