

Invitation and Response

Matthew 22:1-14 [MW17-30]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 15 October 2017

Luke records the parable we've just heard in his gospel

- however Matthew's version has some striking differences as you listened, did anything strike you, stand out, make you wonder ...???
- [space for responses]

The first thing to note is the “break” at verses 10 and 11

- there is some disagreement among commentators but it seems likely that Matthew's version combines two separate parables (Luke does not include verses 11-14)
- this morning I'd like to concentrate on verses 11-14 but begin with some comments about the first parable

It seems Matthew's handling of this parable is rather allegorical

- it is possible to assign particular people and groups to the characters in the parable and very pointedly
- this parable is part of a series Jesus told in response to the questioning of his teaching by the Scribes, Pharisees and Teachers of the Law
- it related to God's People, the Hebrew nation, not listening to the prophets and not recognising Jesus

Matthew seems to have found it very odd that the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

- who had both the law and the prophets, refused God's invitation while the people they thought of as being outside and in the dark Gentiles, outcasts and sinners, had responded so readily
- in the parable, the invited guests are the Hebrew nation, invited to be God's people who contemptuously refuse to follow the Son of God
- the invitation going out to the highways and byways stands for the sinners and Gentiles, who never expected an invitation to God's kingdom

I'm not sure just how invitations work in this very technological 21st century

- who still knows what RSVP means? and while what the parable describes might seem odd to us it is how invitations were done in 1st century Palestine
- when invitations were sent out, the day was stated, but not the time on the appointed day, when all things were ready servants were sent out with the final summons
- apparently this is the way things happen in some Pacific Islands even today people know the feast is on, but wait for someone to come telling them it's all ready, then they go
- the problem in this parable is that people were invited, told it was ready but then refused to go

One verse, verse 7, about the army being sent to kill and burn

- seems out of place and over the top (overkill even, excuse the pun) however Matthew was writing around AD 80 and in AD 70, Jerusalem was completely destroyed by the Roman army

- Matthew seems to be highlighting the total disaster that was visited on those who refused to recognise the Son of God

Just a couple of concluding remarks on this section

- the invitation God gives is not all gloom and hardship it is to something as joyous as a party
- then, the things that distract people from responding to God's invitation are not necessarily bad things
- the tragedy is so often "second bests" shut out the "best" and it is the best we are invited to
- and the focus is not so much on being punished for not following Jesus but to consider what will be missed by not responding

Now, I have read this parable many times

- but when I read it this time, verses 11 to 13 really struck me in fact they jarred and stopped me short

Just consider for a moment, the invited guests refuse to come to the party

- so people from here, there and everywhere are not so much invited as dragged in, as and where they are
- is it fair, is it reasonable, to expect someone roped in at the last minute to have their best clothes on???
- and for the 'crime' of not having the right clothes one guest is not just evicted from the celebration but tied up and thrown into the painful dark!

Usually such jarring questions point to something crucial in a particular Bible passage

- and so it is here and it begins to make more sense if we put some space between verses 10 and 11 as if they are two separate but related parables

The first thing is to note that the invitation to the celebration

- came from the wide-armed, open-hearted generous hospitality of the king grace offered the invitation and grace gathered people in this is the 'open door' of God's amazing love (verses 1-10)
- however once people have responded and come through the door God loves us so much that he desires us not to stay as we were when we came in (verses 11-14)

You may or may not have heard of Mickey Cohen

- though with a name like that you just know he has to be involved in shady dealings Mickey Cohen was in fact an infamous gangster of the post-war era

One night he attended an evangelistic meeting and seemed interested. Realising what a dramatic impact his conversion could have, many Christian leaders began visiting him. After one long night session he was urged to open the door and let Christ in. Cohen responded. But as the months passed, people saw no change in his life of crime. When confronted he responded that no one had told him he would have to give up his work or his friends. After all, there were Christian football players, Christian cowboys, Christian politicians; why not a Christian gangster? It was only then he was told about repentance. And at that point he wanted nothing to do with Christianity.

It is true that the door is open to all and open wide

- however when people come in they must bring a life which seeks to fit the love which has been given to them
- grace is not only a gift
grace is a grave responsibility
- people cannot go on living the life they did before they came through the door before they met Jesus
and that was the problem with Mickey Cohen

William Barclay puts it very well:

The door is open, but the door is not open for the sinner to come in and remain a sinner, but for the sinner to come and become a saint.

In early Christianity the new identity of conversion

- was often pictured as donning a new set of clothes
the language of “changing clothes” expressing the giving up of the old way of life and putting on the new Christian identity
- with this understanding
the harsh reaction of the king in verses 11-13 begins to make more sense

It would seem Matthew is addressing these verses to those “in” the church

- to those who have already responded to the invitation of Jesus
as a warning of the dire consequences of accepting the invitation and doing nothing except showing up
- it seems to be looking towards the final judgement
where what is required is that authentic Christian faith be shown and seen in deeds of love and justice
- unless the people who have responded to God's forgiveness also put on Christ's way of life
they will be cast out of the kingdom
- for they have shown by their conduct they do not really belong

And so it becomes for us here today, who have responded to the invitation

- and who are “in” the church, a warning not to rest on our laurels
who we are and whose we are is shown by our actions of love and grace and justice
- and if that is not the case, Matthew warns, then we insiders will become outsiders
in the dark with weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth

A rather grim picture which William Barclay lightens by taking up the clothing metaphor

- if you go to visit a friend at their home
you probably won't go in the clothes you wear in the factory or the garden
sure it's not the clothes that matter to the friend
nor a desire to put on a show
- it is simply a matter of respect that you present yourself at your friend's house
as neatly as you can
- the way you prepare yourself to go there
is the way in which you show affection and esteem for your friend

So what might that all mean for us here this morning ... ?

- well, Barclay applies this parable to coming to God's house
in way that I find inspiring and challenging:

This parable has nothing to do with the *clothes* in which we go to church and everything to do with the *spirit* in which we go to God's house. There are garments of the mind and of the heart and of the soul which are essential in approaching God: the garment of expectation, the garment of humble penitence, the garment of faith and the garment of reverence. We must ensure we do not go to God's house without preparation.

If every person came to church *prepared to worship* after a little prayer, a little thought and a little self examination, then worship would be worship indeed – the worship in which and through which things happen in people's souls and in the life of the Church and in the affairs of the world. (repeat?)

So, the 'take home thought', the 'takeaway challenge' for this week:

- take up Barclay's challenge and prepare for coming to worship as he suggests
- consider the “clothes” you are wearing as a follower of Jesus
how are they showing in acts of love and grace and justice
- make sure you are far from naked, that you are in fact well-clothed
in your dealings with people, your speaking, your work and relaxation
- and believe that this will make a difference
and help others to see the joy of responding to the invitation of Jesus

Let's have a moment for reflection

- then we'll join in praying again the prayer for the week

*Kind and generous God,
you prepare a feast for all people.
May we prepare for your banquet
by putting on the garment of love that springs from a pure heart,
a clear conscience and a genuine faith.
Help us to bring the lost and the lonely,
the poor and those in need
to your feast where all are fed.
We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.*