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Bound Hand and Foot (Matthew 22: 1-14)

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‘Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables’, writes Matthew, and once more we’re left in complex interpretive territory. At least, that’s my experience of our reading tonight! The story starts promisingly. The first round of invited guests looks petty and mean, and the inviting king generous and warm-hearted; but then the king himself seems to turn unwarrantedly nasty, destroying those who won’t come and casting out one who does. We’re left with the dis-comforting conclusion that ‘few’ in the end ‘are chosen’ and wondering whether we’d dare turn up in the first place!

I want us to engage our unease with this story – but in order not to do violence to the text, I think we might need to approach it at two levels. So first – the big picture. We saw last week that this section of Matthew’s gospel is set in the final stages of Jesus’ teaching ministry. He’s entered Jerusalem for the last time, riding on a donkey, and he’s embarked on a series of exchanges with the religious leaders at the Temple. The parable we’ve just heard is the third in a row told by Jesus in response to the demand of the chief priests and Pharisees that he say by what authority he’s teaching the crowds and acting out the arrival of the Messiah.

All three of these parables concern two parties and their differing responsiveness to a figure of authority. In the first, Jesus spoke of two sons – one of whom refused his father’s request to go work in his vineyard, but then changed his mind and went, while the other son who promised to go, didn’t. The second parable concerned tenants who had been leased the use of a vineyard by a landowner, but then refused to hand over the appropriate fruits with the result, Jesus says, that the vineyard is to be taken away from them and given to others. This third parable tells of guests invited to a royal wedding banquet who renege on their promised attendance and are duly punished, their places taken (once again) by others.

All three stories, then, are about the difference between saying you'll do something and actually doing it. In the context of Jesus' confrontation with the religious leaders, they're rather pointed little reminders about the necessity to bear fruit and not rely on assumptions of entitlement. The implication, of course, is that the chief priests and Pharisees are doing just that. And remember, all this is to do with the question of establishing Jesus' authority. 'Recognize yourselves in what I'm saying', Jesus implies, 'and you will recognize God's judgement come upon you'.

What, however, of the character of God as portrayed here? In particular, what are we to make of the anger and violence attributed to him in this third parable? Some commentators are so disturbed by it, they call in question whether in fact we're meant to identify the person of God with the character of the king. Scholar Paul Nuechterlein notes that at the beginning of each of these parables, the figure of authority is explicitly described as an *anthropos*, a man. In the Greek, it's written: 'A man, a householder', 'a man, a landowner', 'a man, a king' – *anthropo basilei*. Some say that the use of *anthropos* in this way is a typical feature of the Aramaic language. Nuechterlein wonders, however, if Matthew is deliberately using the double designation to suggest that this king should be seen merely as a man and not God.¹

I think it's important at least to consider this suggestion. Not to assume that we always know who, in any parable, is standing for the character of God. In this case, however, I'm not convinced. The image of the 'wedding banquet' is a messianic image – the coming of the Messiah is spoken of by the prophet Isaiah as the coming of the bridegroom. It's hard to imagine Jesus speaking of a king giving a wedding banquet for his son, at this culminating stage of his ministry, without intending his audience to get that echo. Moreover, the responses of the reneging guests to the king's persistent invitation sound remarkably like the responses of God's rebellious people throughout Israel's history: they wouldn't come, they made light of his considerable preparations, and finally they 'seized his slaves, mistreated and killed

¹ Paul Nuechterlein, 'Exegetical Notes', Girard Lectionary Proper 23A, <http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-a/proper23a/> [accessed 13 October 2017].

them'. It's just as Jesus will go on to lament: 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!' So it seems to me a bit of a stretch to dis-identify God from the character of this king.

Which means we have to figure out how to read the violence. Notice that, in the story as told by Matthew, it comes in two waves. First, the king is said to be enraged at those who killed his emissaries and so to have 'sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city'. Here's where some historical context seems relevant. Matthew's gospel was written some time in the 80s – not the 1980s, but towards the end of the first century! It's just after the Romans have destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple in 70AD – the major part of the destruction being caused by fire. Matthew is apparently interpreting this calamity as God's judgement on the authorities and people of Jerusalem, who have reneged on attending the Messianic banquet and done violence to those who invited them.

This interpretive strategy is clearly fraught with moral as well as theological danger. Matthew's gospel has been profoundly implicated in the history of Christian anti-Semitism and super-sessionism, as if all that has befallen the Jewish people is a deserved consequence of God's wrath. This, as Rowan Williams has said, is a dark 'legacy of the first gospel'² and cannot be condoned.

Yet this is where, perhaps, the king's casting out of the later invitee is significant. Because if Matthew is, at least to some extent, portraying the sack of Jerusalem as God's punishment of Israel, then he's certainly not assuming that those Gentiles who are brought in from 'outside' are themselves immune from accountability and the possibility of judgement. They too must bear fruit, and be appropriately clothed if they are to remain invited guests. Over the centuries, commentators have allegorized 'the wedding robe' that's not being worn in a whole range of ways – Augustine thought it represented 'charity', Luther 'faith', and Calvin 'righteousness'.³ And on this reading, the hyperbolically depicted nature of the king's

² Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p.260.

³ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew A Commentary* Volume 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), p.390.

response to unrobed guest signifies that Christians are no more immune from serious accountability than Israel herself.

But all that still leaves us with some difficult questions to do with the seeming conflation in this text of judgement and violence, of Messianic fulfilment and apocalypse. Which brings us to one final interpretive twist. Jesuit commentator Raymond Schwager has said that although the sayings and parables of Jesus make extensive use of apocalyptic language, 'what strikes one immediately is that the one who speaks of ... driving out ... sinners is himself driven out'.⁴ And this, he suggests, subtly shifts our interpretation.

In this parable, for example, the man without a wedding garment keeps silent (Matt. 22:12), but Matthew makes much of the fact that Jesus himself is silent before his judge (Matt. 26:63; 27:12-14). The man is cast into 'outer darkness, and yet in a similar way Jesus found himself in the outer darkness of abandonment by God (Mark 15:33-37). These correspondences, Schwager suggests, aren't accidental. 'They give expression in narrative form' to the fundamental insight 'that the one who was judged on the cross identified himself with all victims of sin' and with all who are deemed sinners. And he goes on: 'The first act of separation of "the just" from "the rejected" is totally overturned again, as the judge himself steps in on the side of the rejected and takes over their role'.

In other words, as James Alison has also suggested, for all its apocalyptic language there are also inklings in Matthew's text of the birth of a new understanding of God. On the cross, Jesus entered the depths of our alienation – silenced, cursed, bound hand and foot, and cast out of the city. In so doing, he transformed our image of God and God's judgement. Because if the Messiah comes in this way, then 'God' can no longer be imagined as distant, violent and judging our failure from the outside. Rather, he is with us, handed over and sharing our wretchedness, our suffering and our shame so as to liberate us from the inside. This

⁴ Raymond Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation*, cited in <http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-a/proper23a/> [accessed 13 October 2017].

is a profound shift in religious imagination. It turns everything upside down. No wonder Matthew's text struggles fully to comprehend it. No wonder he still vacillates between imagery of the vengeful God of old and the emerging, still fragile understanding of the mystery of kingly power, exercised in rejection.

I said earlier that this text puts us in complex interpretive territory – we might see it as a text in travail. But let's remember, in the end, what it points us to. I'm left with an image of Jesus conversing with his enemies, exposed to their hostility, telling them stories, seeking to the very end to help them see themselves more truthfully, and hoping to draw them, with all people, into God's feast and joy. Jesus being vulnerably before them in this way is for me an image of enormous gallantry and solidarity – it's the form of God's love.