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### **Being Guests (Matthew 22.1-14)**

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The parable we just heard is not one that struck me as ideal for launching our Benedictus hybrid service! Here we are, seeking to be inclusive of all who wish to come, all of us figuring out the technology and logistics of our participation – whether we're at home or here in the hall at St Ninian's, some for the first time. And, rather than hearing something about God's unconditional welcome and our universal belonging, the lectionary comes up with a passage that makes it sound as though at any moment any of us could be dis-invited or cast into outer darkness. And that's even before we get to my anxieties about Zoom collapsing and tipping us out of the service! So what are we going to do with this??!

As you know from the last couple of weeks, this section of Matthew's gospel depicts an extended dialogue between Jesus and the chief priests and elders in Jerusalem. Tonight's reading is the third of three parables in which Jesus effectively accuses these religious leaders of failing to recognize God's presence or respond to God's call on their lives. Though they like to think of themselves as exemplary God-botherers, Jesus thinks they're mistaking what real faithfulness and real obedience involves. So – in the parable of the two sons, Jesus likens them to the son who promises to go into his father's vineyard to do the work, but then does not go; in the parable of the wicked tenants, he suggests they've seized for themselves the vineyard whose harvest belongs to the landowner. And in this parable of the wedding banquet, he likens them to those who poop the party prepared by a king for his son.

The imagery of these stories is worth attending to. The vineyard represents Israel itself. It symbolizes a place, a people called to bear fruit for God. The wedding banquet, on the other hand, represents the kingdom of heaven. That is, it signifies the consummation of God's love for God's people, the celebration and fulfilment of it

all. In the vineyard related parables, then, it's as though Jesus charges these leaders with failing to labour faithfully as stewards of Israel. Rather than helping this chosen people to produce fruit and share it with the giver of their life, they're going their own way, serving their own ends. But in this parable of the wedding banquet, the emphasis is not so much on the fruit they're failing to produce, as on the gift they're refusing to accept. They're invited to participate in the consummation of God's love, to share in the general dance, and they refuse. The king 'sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come'.

As is the way in these parables, there's always a second chance. The king persists with the invitation – this time making it even more enticing by specifying the preparations that have been made, the goodness (to a non-vegetarian, at least) of the feast on offer. 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet'. There are gifts I want to give you, a rejoicing I'd love you to join. But at this point, the refusal of the invitees becomes willful, rude, in some cases positively malicious: 'they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them'.

There's an absurdity about scenario, an inordinate disproportion in the response of the imagined guests to this invitation, this king's desire to share from abundance. In what possible context can you imagine people not only spurning such an offer, but actively harming the bearers of it? The host is a king – say it's the Queen inviting you to a garden party at Buckingham Palace? Would you make light of it, go about your ordinary business, murder the odd valet?? The story is meant to be preposterous – as if Jesus is trying to get his hearers to see the magnitude of the hospitality they're refusing, the grace from which they are excluding themselves.

Well, the king in the story is said to be violently enraged by their behaviour. 'He sent his army, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city', the text says. Now, as with last week's reading, this parable is concerned at least in part with what

happens to the Jewish people in the wake of Jesus' rejection by the religious authorities and his death. Matthew's depiction of what happens to those who refuse the invitation to the banquet reflects what happened when Jerusalem was sacked by the Roman emperor Titus in the year 70AD,<sup>1</sup> not long before this gospel was written. It thus reflects a troubling tendency in some of the Christian scriptures, to interpret the destruction of Jerusalem as divine punishment, a sign of God's withdrawing of favour from the formerly 'chosen' people of Israel, on account of their supposed 'refusal' of God's invitation in Christ. Undoubtedly that interpretive tendency was present in the early church. But even in the parable, there is some subtlety in the portrayal.

For although it looks as though the guests first invited to the banquet [symbolically, the Jews] are shunned in favour of everyone else, there's no presumption that those invited last are more worthy. The king in the story now extends his invitation to 'the main streets' and his slaves 'gathered all whom they found, *both good and bad*, so the wedding hall was filled with guests'. That's an interesting little acknowledgement – once again, the gratuity of the invitation is stressed. There's nothing about earning the right to be there ... it's all about the willingness to accept the invitation. Which would be great, if the parable stopped there. But then comes a further troubling twist to the tale. One of this motley crew has gotten the dress code wrong, and is summarily cast out by a seemingly hypervigilant host. Does this mean the welcome is conditional after all – that's it not just about the willingness to come along, but the capacity to show up in a certain approved way?

Well, the commentaries suggest that there was a custom that guests at such occasions were provided with festal robes to wear. 'In this way the poor need not be ashamed of their rags, and the rich no right to be proud of their dinner jackets and gowns. All came in on the same footing, just as in the parable of the workers in the

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), p.231.

vineyard'.<sup>2</sup> The idea, then, is not that this guest was cast out because he lacked the means to dress appropriately; he was cast out because he lacked the humility to be clothed by his host. And perhaps the reference is to the prophet Isaiah, 'I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels' (Isaiah 61.10).

Jesus' persistent critique of the religious leaders is that they sought to hold their 'goodness', their worthiness, their 'chosenness' before God as possession and achievement. They are wrapped, clothed, in self-righteousness. And what Jesus wants them to see is that it's this very stance that separates them from God and from others. And this is not just an issue for them; it's potentially an issue for any of us. Many are called, Jesus says – Jews, Gentiles, good and bad; but few are chosen. Because in the counter-intuitive logic of the kingdom, 'being chosen' is not about earning our selection, making ourselves worthy or relying on the merit of birth or success, or even virtue; it's about humbly receiving our goodness from God and then discovering ourselves *being* different – able to participate in love, in joy, in communion. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit', Jesus has said earlier in this gospel, 'for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 5.3).

Next weekend, it will be 12 months exactly since Benedictus relocated to St Ninian's and we held our first service here. We spoke then of our vision of being a waterhole, a place of sanctuary and replenishment, in and for our city. Part of our hope was that being more securely located in a place would enable new things to flow from here in service of the wider community. The year since then has looked rather different to our imagining! We have begun to put down roots in this place, but we have also discovered a connectedness that goes well beyond our sharing of the same physical space. We have indeed been gathered together from the highways and byways, from Perth and Hobart, Melbourne, Sydney, Tathra and Orange, from

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<sup>2</sup> Green, *The Message of Matthew*, p.231.

Leeds, Cape Town and Auckland, from just down the street and as far away as Tuggeranong!

And it seems to me that as we gather for the first time in this 'hybrid' way, as we continue to discern and respond to what God is doing among us and how God is calling us to be, it is good to be reminded that all of us are here because we've been invited by our host. All of us are guests at the same feast. The invitation, wherever we have come from and however we are here, is to let ourselves be clothed, which is to say transfigured, by God's gift and grace – so that our life together participates in the consummation of God's love and makes visible that love in the world. Or as the letter to the Colossians puts it: 'As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience ... Above all clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful' (Colossians 3.12, 14-15). As truly I am, for all of you.