Matthew 22:1-14

Philippians 4:1-9

It is the morning after the night before, the morning after Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He has spent the night in Bethany, probably with his friends Martha and Mary. And we catch up with him again as he comes back into Jerusalem and heads for the temple, where he starts to teach his disciples. Along comes a group of chief priests and elders. They are not happy, and, as we read in Matthew 21 verse 23, they challenge him with these words: *“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”*

As often happens, Jesus doesn’t give a direct answer, but instead tells a series of three parables, stories with a meaning.

The first is the story of two sons, one who does what his father asks and one who doesn’t. The second is the story of the absentee landlord of a vineyard, and the failure of his tenants to pay their rent. The situation is made worse by the murder of the landlord’s son when he turns up to collect the rent. And the tenants are replaced. And the third story is the story of the wedding feast which we heard in our gospel reading this morning, and which I will come back to in a minute.

It is important to take these three parables together, and to read them as Jesus’ response to the hostility of the Jewish authorities. Each of the parables speaks of one group of people losing their privileged position, and being replaced by those whom they have looked down on. These parables raise the fundamental question of who are the true people of God, and suggest that a radical change is about to take place.

So let’s look in a bit more detail at the third of these stories, at our reading from Matthew 22 this morning.

In Jesus’ time, it was customary to send out an advance invitation to a wedding feast, or similar celebration, giving people the chance to accept, but then to send out a second messenger on the day itself to say that the meal was ready.

The king in our story then sends out his slaves to call all those he had invited to the banquet for his son’s wedding, but they don’t come. Some simply find other places to go – to their farm or their business. But then the story becomes quite bizarre, with the murder of the messengers by some of the other guests, a full-scale military campaign, and the destruction of the city, all whilst the dinner gets cold. The burning of a city is a very extreme reaction to a refused dinner invitation, but the symbolism is clear enough.

Jesus’ message here is a harsh one. The refusal of the Jewish leaders to respond to God’s call, he says, will lead first to the rejection and death of his messenger, in the person of Jesus, of course, and ultimately to the destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus spells this out at the end of Matthew 23, where we read *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings … and you were not willing. See your house is left to you – desolate!*

The king, having destroyed those who murdered his messengers, along with their city, now sends his slaves out again into the streets with instructions to bring in *all whom they found, both good and bad* to join in with the wedding banquet.

This is a more encouraging message, hinting at the radical change which I mentioned earlier. It reminds us that in Jesus God’s love and forgiveness are available to all who hear his call, whether they are Jews or Gentiles, whatever their background.

But the narrative then takes a new and unexpected turn. Even amongst the newly invited guests, there is no automatic guarantee of acceptance. Even someone from the streets is expected to dress appropriately for a wedding. To do otherwise is to insult the host, who assumes that the guest is arrogant, or that he doesn’t want to take part fully in the celebrations. This leads to the guest being thrown out onto the streets again.

The wedding clothes in this story represent the righteousness – the being put right with God - which is needed to enter God’s kingdom, and which comes to us through Jesus. It is Jesus, in his death and resurrection, who has provided us with a way back to God, with these clothes. However, in the end, it is down to us to make the choice, to choose whether or not to put on the wedding clothes, to follow Jesus back to God or not.

So, in adding this little twist at the end of the story, Jesus reminds his listeners that, although the kingdom of heaven is open to everyone, there is no place there for anyone who does not take their privileged position seriously. At the end of the second story of the vineyard, Jesus says that *the kingdom of God will be given to a people that produces the fruit of the kingdom.* In other words, being part of God’s kingdom demands a response from his people. At the end of this story, Jesus goes even further, warning that those who do not take their place in the kingdom seriously, who do not respond appropriately, will be *thrown into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

This is a tough message. It was a tough message for the Jewish authorities to hear, and it is a tough message for us to hear. There is an open invitation to God’s kingdom. All are welcome. But there are expectations. Being part of God’s kingdom demands a response from us. It demands evidence of repentance, of changed lives and changed hearts.

As I close, I just want to look briefly at our epistle reading which provides us with an example of that radical change which I mentioned just now, of the fact that God invites everyone, whether they are Jews or Gentiles, into his kingdom. St Paul here writes to the first Christian church established on the European continent, in Philippi, in what is now Greece. He even mentions some of these Greek believers by name, as he reminds them of what changed lives and changed hearts, of what being part of God’s kingdom, should mean for them with these encouraging words:

*Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. And the God of peace will be with you.*

Amen