

The Church's prayer for this Sunday – The eighteenth Sunday after Trinity

God, our judge and saviour,
teach us to be open to your truth
and to trust in your love,
that we may live each day
with confidence in the salvation which is given
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Bible readings and reflection for Sunday 11th October 2020, the eighteenth Sunday after Trinity

Psalm 23

The Divine Shepherd

A Psalm of David.

¹The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

²He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters;

³he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths

for his name's sake.

⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil;

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff—

they comfort me.

⁵You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord

my whole life long.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

Today's reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 25: 1-9

Praise for Deliverance from Oppression

25 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.

²For 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.

³Therefore strong peoples will glorify you;
cities of ruthless nations will fear you.

⁴For you have been a refuge to the poor,
a refuge to the needy in their distress,
a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat.

When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm,

⁵ the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place,
you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds;
the song of the ruthless was stilled.

⁶On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear.

⁷And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;

⁸he will swallow up death for ever.

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,
for the Lord has spoken.

⁹It will be said on that day,
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.
This is the Lord for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Today's reading from the gospels: Matthew 22: 1-14

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet

22 Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ²“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴Again he sent other slaves, saying, “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.” ⁵But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. ⁷The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸Then he said to his slaves, “The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.” ¹⁰Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

¹¹‘But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹²and he said to him, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” And he was speechless. ¹³Then the king said to the attendants, “Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” ¹⁴For many are called, but few are chosen.’

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

A reflection for the eighteenth Sunday after Trinity from Revd David Newton

This is one of the many parables that Jesus tells, which is arresting, startling and somewhat confusing on first glance. We probably like the friendly idea of inviting people from the highways and byways to the wedding banquet. But otherwise we might feel a bit stumped. The enraged king burns a city down. And then, having invited all these ‘waifs’ and ‘strays’ sends one packing for not having the right wedding clothes. And then, the whole thing ends with that enigmatic statement, ‘for many are called, but few are chosen.’

Our initial instinct – that draws us to the extraordinary invite given to those ‘not worthy’ – is surely a good one. This is the centre of the parable. The rest – the stranger bits – fall into place around this centre (and we’ll get to all that shortly).

But for a moment, we should pause at this beautiful, central image. The feast of the kingdom, which we somehow participate in via the Eucharist and seek to manifest in our lives, is made up of people who really do not deserve to be there.

To push a bit further, the only people who sit round the Lord's Table (both now and into eternity) are those who know they do not deserve to be there.

This parable is about the extraordinary, and possibly downright offensive, generosity of God who wants to sit and eat with each one of us. It is about a lavish and unconditional love poured out upon the bad, that the desires of their hearts might be changed. It is about the love poured out upon the good that they might see they are not half as good as they think they are.

It is about the radical inclusivity of God who creates a new community – no longer divided by the tribalistic barriers we put up. Here is a wedding feast where Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female (Gal 3.28) are all invited as equals.

Let's make no mistake; even this central idea, around which the parable revolves, is actually fairly difficult to digest if we hear it properly. It says that the kingdom of God is a feast for saints and sinners, made up of people that are nothing like us, and made up of people who we really don't think should be there at all. Such a parable cannot help but have deep political implications.

First, for the church. We all have deep seated (and sinful) notions of who we might expect to find around the Lord's table, what kind of person should or should not have a place at the feast. I have a good friend pierced and tattooed to the hilt, who was locked out of various church jobs because of how he looked! We might think about issues of sexuality or gender. We might think of issues of class and cultural behaviours tied up with that. If we are to manifest the kingdom, we must offer a radically inclusive welcome, that is likely to make us feel rather uncomfortable. We must also be prepared to be guests at other people's tables. Those are a few political implications for the church. Second then, for the nation – or at least for our political response within it. We cannot read a parable like this and turn a blind eye to the ways in which it challenges the barriers that are put up that try to keep people 'out' of any metaphorical feast. Foremost in our mind must surely be our nation's entirely inadequate and unjust response to immigration and most specifically towards those seeking asylum. The Home Secretary is right to see the system is broken. We pray she has ears to listen to the Spirit in the work of the Jesuit Refugee Service and other such groups. The radical, inclusive, generosity of God is difficult to deal with. It makes me squirm. I'd prefer a god who just lets the nice people like me in. After all, I prefer hanging out with people like me, it's easier. But this parable drives home to us the offensive grace of God who is always on the side of the poor and needy (as Isaiah says).

That's the centre of the parable. What about the 'edges' then: The king burning the city, the man thrown out, the little saying, 'many called, few chosen'?

It's not all as strange as it seems. God's generosity, his unconditioned love, is infinite, such that there really is no 'space' for anything that cuts across that. There is no 'space' in the heavenly feast for tribalism (hence the burning of the city). No 'space' for a life that remains untouched and unchanged by the radical, inclusive generosity of God (hence the one

thrown out who is wearing the wrong clothes). And ultimately – as our reading from Isaiah says, there is no 'space' for death. For nothing cuts across the radical, inclusive generosity of God like death. It naturally and quite simply stops us sharing in the feast. So, if we are to imagine a heavenly feast for all – where none are cut off – death can be no more. All - past, present, and future – are invited.

The choice of whether we respond to such generosity is always ours. The summons is there. The 'call' is there for all. But only a few choose it. Day after day, again and again, the question is whether we will choose to live in such radical, inclusive generosity – as both receivers and givers of it – or whether we'd rather stay away from such a raucous feast.

Amen.