

Trinity XVII 2014 St Marylebone 11 am

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There are some Gospel stories which make it really hard for the preacher, and this morning's gospel from Matthewⁱ is one of them!

Not that it is not a good story; it is just that Luke'sⁱⁱ telling of it makes it so much easier.

In Luke's version, all that happens to those who don't respond with alacrity to the invitation to the banquet is that they miss out. As it might say in a TV disclaimer: *Viewers can be assured that no slaves were harmed during his telling of this parable. No one's city gets destroyed.*

For Luke, the disabled dinner guests get their fill and no one gets thrown out for wearing the wrong clothes.

Luke's telling of the parable would not warrant even a PG certificate. It is, all in all, much more palatable and affirming. Read it when you get home and you'll see what I mean.

I am sure, that all of us would prefer to hear Luke's version of the story with its unconditional acceptance over Matthew's telling, any day.

When we gather for the Eucharist, we believe that we do so in anticipation of the great heavenly banquet to which all are invited; ta foretaste of the feast to which everyone is welcome, admission guaranteed through the once-for-all obedient life and sacrifice of Christ on Calvary.

Is God the Father, who loved the world so much that he sent his only Son into the world carrying his invitation, rejected and killed so that I can have a place at the table really going to turn anybody away if they turn up in the wrong clothes?

But maybe, this is precisely the point of Matthew's telling of the tale.

What happened to Jesus, to the incarnate word of God was messy, gritty, and very raw.

Born in less than ideal circumstances, exiled to Egypt as a child, scraping some sort of subsistence living as a builder-carpenter before trudging around Galilee and Judaea with a bunch of ne'r do wells who failed to

grasp what he was saying, betrayed by friend, arrested, beaten, summarily tried, put to death in the most hideous way: there is very little, if anything, that is nice or clean or lovely or tidy in his story.

The bread which we break and eat and the wine which we pour out and drink are his torn and bleeding flesh.

They speak to us of the painful end to which Jesus journeyed and which opened the doors to the eternal banquet at which he himself is food and drink.

There is no getting away with air-brushing out the servants who are rejected and ill-treated and killed; Jesus had just seen John the Baptist arrested and beheadedⁱⁱⁱ, and he knew that his end was likely to be no better than his, and that the end for those who followed him and who carried the invitation to the great heavenly banquet in their lives would probably be no easier or better either.

Jesus was always at pains to point out to those who said they would follow him exactly what the likely cost would be.^{iv}

At best, for those of us who follow Jesus in a relatively secure West, the worst we can expect is for others to deem us simply irrelevant.

Jesus tried to point out in his parable that he was not the first, and that he would certainly not be the last prophet to proclaim God's invitation to new and abundant life, who would be ill-treated or even put to death.

In Luke, the evangelist adds: "See, Israel, how you treat your prophets?" It is one of the details Matthew didn't retain.

Jesus warning to Israel, to the Scribes and the Pharisees and the Priests, is a warning to us, his Church, for the Scribes and the Pharisees and the Priests of Israel were not fundamentally capable of any greater perversity in dealing with then things of God than we are!

We can just as easily, as easily and as self-importantly and self-righteously, as the guest who has not bothered to put on a wedding garment, suppose that we know best, that we know precisely what we need to gain admission to the eternal banquet without listening to God's call carefully or even at all!

We are no less capable than the Scribes and the Pharisees and the Priests of ignoring all whom God sends to call us out of our complacency or to challenge our cosy routines and our general lack of commitment.

The uncomfortable fact, which Matthew spells out very clearly, is that Jesus parable is, first and foremost, a warning to the Church, and that means to you and to me.

God calls us and he chooses us in Christ, he guarantees us a place at the table but he also expects us to pay attention and to listen and to live as those who have heard the good news and not as those who take it all for granted; to live and to work and to pray as those who treasure the invitation and not like someone puts it safely on the mantle shelf who waits, because it is their right, until their names is announced for all to hear in heaven.

The Father who issues the invitation expects those who accept it to make an effort to clothe themselves with the new resurrection life of his Son and to live it boldly.

This is a theme to which St Paul returns over and over again. How are the members of the growing young Churches to live? How can they clothe themselves in

preparation to the banquet to which God has invited them.

Writing to the Colossians^v, Paul says:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, [this is how you are to] clothe yourselves, [put on] compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 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. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw a man there who was not dressed in wedding clothes, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?' And the man had nothing to say. . . For many are called, but few are chosen." Amen

ⁱ Matthew 22:1-14

ⁱⁱ Luke 14:15-24

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-27

^{iv} Mark 10:17-27

^v Colossians 3:12-17