



St Marylebone
Parish Church

18th Sunday After Trinity 2020, 11am Choral Eucharist

I remember at primary school a ridiculous amount of playground time was devoted to whether you were an ‘innie’ or an ‘outie’. We were talking about belly buttons of course, but today’s readings are all about ‘innies’ and ‘outies’ too – not belly buttons this time. This time it’s life and death, we’ve all experienced it: **‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’**. In today’s Gospel those invited, those chucked out, and those who don’t come.

The COVID pandemic has done strange things to our relationships. I don’t know about you, but some of my relationships (with people and other stuff) have fizzled out. Some have become more precious than ever. Our relationships with others, once sadly indifferent, have become strained and guarded.

This pandemic has also established kinds of ‘insiders’ - those with secure housing, finances, health, and those without. Lost jobs, relationships, homes, lost health and mental wellbeing. I have been struck, seeing more rough sleepers about, just how quickly *any* of us can fall ‘down, and out’. ‘Insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ of all kinds.

Today is also Homelessness Sunday. Homelessness is such a massive and complex problem that it can be tempting to ‘be sad and do nothing’. But we musn’t. We must pray and work for imaginative and effective change.

A good start is to never let our language or behaviour become dehumanising. When a problem is big, we make people statistics: it is true of homelessness and of COVID. Every one of those numbers is

someone for whom Christ our God gave His life – who are we to say they are worth less?

When it isn't wise to give money, we *can* give food or useful stuff, or pull out our smartphone and ping a donation to a charity that can help. We can *always* give people the dignity of saying hello, and offer a prayer for folk as we go. I am not afraid of dying and meeting Jesus; but **my stomach lurches when I think that He will bear the face of every person I have ignored or dehumanised.**

And so *to* Jesus' wedding banquet. 'Insiders' and 'outsiders'. Fr Stephen reminded the 8.30 congregation last Sunday that whenever Jesus speaks of a wedding or a banquet we must remember that He is talking about Heaven and the Eucharist. Like layers of rock (or indeed a wedding cake) **the language of banquet, wedding, heaven, Eucharist are always bound together in the symbology of the New Testament.**

This morning Jesus speaks of the people *assumed* to be destined for Heaven – **the insiders** – and they **find themselves... outside, by their own deafness and greed.** Too busy trying to save *themselves* by work or violence or autonomy.

It is the street dwellers and **outsiders who end up finding their place in Heaven.** There is no distinction here between the unlucky and the undeserving. The wedding hall is filled.

So, in whose company do *we* want to be found?

But there's that last confusing sting in the tail before I finish. The guest, right at the end of today's Gospel, noticed not wearing a wedding robe. Thus unfit, he is thrown out. For 'many are called but few are chosen'.

A chilling end.

We must remember that **when Jesus speaks harshly like this, He is always talking to religious leaders.** Open your New Testaments: prostitutes, tax collectors, outsiders of all sorts, fine. Jesus reserves his ire for religious types, like us.

So the question we're desperately asking now is **'how do we get one of these wedding robes?'** Suddenly more sought after than the limited edition Kanye West trainers that sell on Ebay for the price of a bungalow in Bognor. The 'wedding robe' is our only hope.

It's not an actual garment, of course, it's a symbol of a person's *belonging* in Heaven. Not even the boutiques of Marylebone High Street sell *these*. How do we 'get our robe'? So how *do we belong* in heaven?

Zip forward to the Revelation to St John - we find those *enrobed*, washed in the blood of The Lamb. Not earned, not bought, but *given* us by Him who clothes us in His own life. ***Belong* in the water of the font, *belong* with Jesus enthroned upon the altar of every Church in the world, so that (our vision cleared) we will *also* recognise Him in the least of our brothers and sisters, and belong with Him and them in Heaven.**

It all comes together, you see?

At this testing time for us all this Gospel and Homelessness Sunday ask us: Who's *in* and *out*? Who does God value, and who should we? What *matters*? Where do we *belong*?

Today's first reading says, the Lord of hosts will make 'for all peoples a feast of rich food...of well-matured wines...He will destroy the shroud

[the garment of death juxtaposed with the wedding robe of eternal life] he will swallow up death forever’.

No insiders or outsiders. His gift and our only hope. Blessed are we who are called to His supper. Where will you *belong*?

Some Homelessness Sunday Statistics:

Homeless people are often invisible, riding buses all night long and working in the day.

Many are sofa surfing or living unsafely in exploitative situations for shelter.

They are 17 times more likely to suffer violence.

On average die 30 years younger than the rest of us.

2/3s of homeless people suffered violence or abuse from parents or carers growing up.

25% were in council care are children.

Of the over 4,000 rough sleepers in England, almost 3,000 are UK nationals, with less than 1,000 from the EU, and a few hundred from other parts of the world.

The statistics and the stories of how people find themselves where they are is astonishing. These are the people, like Blind Bartimaeus, that Jesus picked out of the shouting crowd, met and healed.