Sermon for Trinity 18 *Mother Emma*

Reading: Matthew 22:1-14

Heaven, we are often told, is like a party.

Throughout the Bible, there are wonderful descriptions of the marriage-feast of the Lamb, hints and echoes of a future great banquet at which we shall encounter Christ as the bridegroom and will drink the wine of the Kingdom with him in Paradise.

As a curate, I once led a children’s service, in which we spoke of Heaven as the best party we would ever go to, where we would meet all the people we had ever loved - and all the people we never had the chance to meet - a party which would go on for ever and ever…

After the service, my vicar, a deeply spiritual man and a great preacher, but who was also a rather shy, reserved bachelor, came to me with a look of absolute horror and said, “I hope Heaven won’t really be an everlasting party. I can’t think of anything more intimidating. I have always pictured it as an everlasting service of Choral Evensong, at which we could sit quietly and listen to the angels sing.” The choristers were very amused, but much as I love the Anglican Choral Tradition, as an extravert and people person I rather hope that there will be at least some party element to it! I am sure that Heaven will bring each of us bliss in our different ways.

Jesus’ stories certainly regularly draw on the image of Heaven as a great banquet, as our Gospel reading today does. Such images reflect God’s abundance and generosity and the sense that in Heaven, no-one will have to go without.

One of his stories portrays the bridesmaids who were not ready in time accompany the bridegroom, and each Gospel contains a narrative along the lines of our story today, about the invited guests who could not be bothered to attend a great banquet (sometimes described as a marriage-feast, sometimes simply as a “supper”).

St Matthew’s version is particularly violent, as the invited guests not only come up with reasons why they are too busy to attend, but some actually attack the messengers who come to tell them that the feast is ready.

Perhaps, however much we do - or don’t - love parties, we have all experienced the awful feeling of not being invited to something, or of worrying that we shall be left off the guest-list. Most primary schools now no longer allow invitations to be given out at school unless they are for all the children in the class, to avoid misery and discrimination.

A particularly painful contemporary element of this kind of story can be seen among the many couples who have already had to postpone their marriages this year, then have whittled down their guest-lists to thirty, to comply with the initial post-lockdown regulations, and now, thanks to recent revisions, are having to reduce their lists to only fifteen, and to un-invite half their guests once again.

It is a very hard decision, and we can only pray for them, for understanding on the part of those not able to share in the current ritual, and for the hope that celebrations may be held in the future to mark the event retrospectively.

But do we sometimes naturally find ourselves assuming that we will automatically be on certain guest-lists and fail to value invitations as the compliment they really are?

Jesus’ stories so often strike at the heart of our cultural assumptions, and his wedding stories are no different. The guests asked to the wedding banquet are so complacent and ignorant about the privilege of receiving an invitation from the King that they make light of it and carry on with what they consider to be more important – their work, their farm and so on.

One of the things that sometimes shocks me (and here I definitely betray my age and my generation!) is that on social media the reply buttons to invitations often offer three options, Yes, No or Maybe. These wedding guests are the “Maybes” – the ones who think they will come if they have nothing better to do on the day, and who, when it comes to it, decide it is not their priority. There are also the definite Nos, who physically attack the messengers, to show their disdain for the King’s authority and his invitation.

The king is furious, declares that those invited were not worthy, and sends his servants to bring in everyone they can find on the streets of the city.

The parallel with the Kingdom of Heaven is only thinly veiled. The leaders of Israel, who saw themselves as the Chosen People, believed that they would automatically be invited to the party in Heaven, regardless of their faithfulness or behaviour. They showed disdain and disrespect for the privilege and gift this represented, and when the time came to make a choice, were complacent or negative about it.

It is generally understood that Jesus intends the messengers who brought the King’s messengers to be the Old Testament prophets, and indeed, John the Baptist himself, who were ignored, jeered at and often physically abused as they shared God’s Word.

In their place, as we have heard in other readings over the past few Sundays, Jesus tells them that the people they despised, the tax-collectors or prostitutes or Gentiles, would go ahead of them to the Heavenly Banquet – summoned like those on the streets in today’s parable because they had not felt themselves automatically entitled to be included.

There is a risk today that people feel themselves entitled to particular things or life-journeys because of their wealth, education, background, status - even race or religious upbringing, and there is a strong message for them here too: those who are called first by God may not be the ones the world might expect, but the humble and the under-valued.

God welcomes to his banquet in Heaven, the people who are humbled and overwhelmed by his invitation; those who do not see themselves as worthy, but who remain open and thankful for his love, his Grace and his promise of eternal life.

Amen