



11th October 2020
The 18th Sunday After Trinity
Sermon – St James's Piccadilly
The Revd Daniel Norris

May I speak in the name of God – Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit.

Have you ever received an invitation to be a guest at a party you really did not want to attend? What did you do about that? I imagine that you did not mistreat, abuse, and murder the person who delivered the invitation. That's what happens in the parable we have heard today.

Have you ever invited people to your party who did not attend? You cleaned, you cooked, you decorated. The table was set, the candles were lit, the music was playing. Everything was ready but some of the guests didn't come? Did it make you so angry that you killed them and burned down their houses? I sincerely hope not, but that's what happens in the parable we have heard today.

The parable of the King's Son's Wedding is so outrageous, so shocking, it demands our attention. The contrast between our first reading from the letter to the Philippeans and this parable could not be starker. To hear this parable and conclude that God is an angry king who, if he doesn't get his way, destroys his own people and burns their cities, may be behaviour we are more familiar with from earthly people of power, but it simply does not fit with the God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ throughout the four gospels. We, along with those who originally heard it, are left speechless like the inappropriately dressed

guest. Everything about the situation is awkward and if we are honest, we may even wish that this fearsome parable wasn't even there.

Parables invite us to reflect, to question, to wonder and to pray. They encourage us to seek meaning, to interpret, to seek to understand. We attempt to get inside the narrative and move around within it, placing ourselves in different positions, interacting with different characters and looking in different directions. It is in this creative and imaginative process, this prayerful engagement and sometimes 'wrestling' with scripture that truth can be found. As we look together at this parable this morning, I join my prayers with those of Charles Spurgeon, the baptist preacher known as 'Prince of Preachers', who preached on this parable in 1888, who said, 'My chief object this morning will be to allay the fears of gracious ones. If they understand what the wedding garment really is, they will probably discover that they are wearing it; and, if not, they will know in whose wardrobe that garment of joy is to be found, and they will gladly ask to be arrayed in it. May the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, give a wedding joy this morning to each wedding guest, by causing them to see for certain that they are clothed in the wedding robe'.

This parable is set in the context of a celebration of love, at the celebration of a wedding. The bride and groom have offered

and accepted their love for one another and they have invited members of their community to share with them in their celebrations. This offers the first dilemma of the parable with which we may be able to identify. Inviting another person to spend time with us or into a loving relationship places us in a very vulnerable position. What if they don't come? what if they don't love us in return? For love to be genuine and healthy it needs to be freely expressed and not forced.

C.S. Lewis, writing in *The Four Loves*, describes this vulnerability well, 'To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.'

The invitation of the king is costly. He faces rejection, and the disappointment, embarrassment and ridicule that may follow. A price has been paid for this feast; an investment made. We are told 'my oxen and fat calves have been slaughtered'. This echoes the parable of the two sons in which a lavish feast is offered in honour of the son who was lost and presumed dead and has returned alive.

But what of the wedding garments? Numerous commentators seeking to help us understand this parable suggest that these might be interpreted as the visible manifestations of the respectful and loving acceptance of the hospitality, gifts and love

of the host. Demonstrating in action the depth of meaning and significance of the event to which they have been invited. We are familiar with the metaphorical concept of garments in scripture. In Colossians chapter 3 we read, 'As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.... Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.' The prophet Isaiah offers us the encouragement of God's promise to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.' (Isaiah 61:3). The invitation to the feast is given, the wedding garment ready but the guest must show up and put it on.

There is no doubt that this is a parable of judgment, but it may not be the judgment we think it is. Speaking about the first group of guests the king says, 'Those invited were not worthy'. By implication those in the second-invited group were worthy. We tend to get nervous and fearful when God begins making judgments. It leaves us wondering whether we are in the first group or the second group. Are we unworthy or are we worthy?

I suspect that our nervousness and fear about God's judgments arise from the assumption that God judges us in the same way we so often judge others and ourselves. More often than not our judgments of others are judgments of exclusion. What if it's just the opposite with God? What if Jesus is trying to shock us into seeing that the kingdom of heaven is not business as usual according to our standards? What if God's judgment on our

lives is one of grace, acceptance, and invitation; a judgment of inclusion? What if God is more loving and merciful with us than we are with ourselves?

In this parable everyone was invited. The worthy and unworthy. The 'good' and the 'bad'. The same opportunity was offered to all. What is the difference between the groups of invited guests? The difference isn't that one was more deserving than the other. The first-invited guests, which some suggest may represent the people of Israel, were the recipients of the king's invitation and favour. But so were the second-invited guests, which some believe represent the inclusion of all people. And so, for that matter, was the man who showed up without a wedding robe. They were all invited. They were all favoured. None of them had done anything to earn or deserve an invitation. It was simply given. If that's true for them, could this also be true for us? The difference isn't that the king likes one group more than the other group. His sole motivation is to share the banquet. The king wants someone, anyone, everyone, to join in his joy and celebration, and be a part of the kingdom. Both groups were given the same opportunity. If that's true for them, could this be true for us? The difference isn't that some guests are 'good' and others are 'bad'. There is no distinction or judgment made based upon behaviour, beliefs, attitudes, or morals. To the contrary, with the second round of invitations the king sends his servants into the main streets with the instruction to 'invite everyone you find'. And they did. They 'went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad.' If that's true for them, could that be true also for us? There's only one thing that distinguishes the first-invited guests

from the second-invited guests. Presence. The second-invited guests showed up. The first-invited guests did not. The 'wedding hall was filled' with the second-invited guests but the first-invited guests 'would not come'. That's the only difference between the two groups.

To be fully present with another is not always easy. It means establishing the other person as our priority. It means seeing them for who they are and not who we want them to be or think they should be. It means opening ourselves to receive their life into our own. It means the vulnerability of entrusting and giving our life to the other. It means really listening to what they say and not just what we hear or want to hear. It means letting go of our own agendas, distractions, fears, and prejudices. It means bringing and offering all that we are and all that we have.

To show up and to be present is to be worthy before God. Perhaps the invitation of this parable, in our time, is to be ever more present with the God who calls us by name, who invites us to come to the table, to put on a garment of love. We remember this each time we come together, with saints behind, beside and before us, to celebrate the Eucharist, the feast to which all are invited and welcome, without exception.

And what of the silent man without a name? who wouldn't or was not ready to put on his wedding garment? This is about more than just a dress code violation or wardrobe malfunction. Something else was missing. 'He was speechless.' It was as if he wasn't really there. Jesus is reminding us that there are times when we show up but we're not really present. Our body is there

but we've left the room. Jesus met people like him and I simply cannot believe that this is the end of the story for him.

So, here's what I wonder... What if this man had said something, anything? What if he had just made his presence known, not so much to the king but to himself? What if he had said, I was hungry. I smelled the food. I trusted you to feed me. I was lonely. I saw the lights on. I trusted you to take me in. I was thirsty. I knew there would be wine. I trusted you to give me a drink. I was naked. I knew people would be well dressed. I trusted you to clothe me. I was sad and grieving and my heart was breaking. I heard music and laughter. I trusted you to share your joy. I was empty. I saw abundance. I trusted you to fill me. I was dying. I saw the door was open. I trusted you to give me life.

What if he had said any of these things or a thousand others things like them? It would have been enough. He would have shown up with all that he was and all that had. He would have been present. Then perhaps the king would have said to him, 'O, my dear friend, I'm so glad you got my invitation. I'm so glad you are here. You are worthy. It wouldn't be the same without you'.

This is the table of Christ. It has been made ready for those who love God and those who want to love more. So come, you who have much faith and you who have little. You who have been to this sacrament often and you who have not been for a long time. You who have tried to follow Christ, and you who have failed. Come. It is Christ who asks us to meet him here.

Amen.

This sermon has been inspired by a sermon preached by Fr. Michael Marsh