



Revd Ro's Reflection on 19th Sunday after Trinity

Proper 23

Year A

Matthew 22.1-14

Philippians 4.1-9

This week I am beginning with the gospel passage from Matthew. It follows on from last week's reading. Jesus is in the temple teaching the crowds. Last week he told the parable of the vineyard; it was a very thinly veiled accusation against the religious leaders. The reading ended ominously with the words,

⁴⁵ 'When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realised that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.' (Matthew 21)

From now on they would be plotting to destroy him but Jesus has a mission to complete and his words of necessity are hard hitting. We have heard Jesus criticising the behaviour of the Pharisees, and people like them, as this quotation from Matthew 15 shows. He never does pull punches when exposing wrongdoing or wrong values,

⁷ 'You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

⁸ "This people honour me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;'

Our reading this week is the parable of the wedding banquet. We have heard Jesus say, 'The first shall be last and the last first.' This passage illustrates a similar theme. His audience would be very familiar with wedding feasts. Invitations would go out and the servants would fetch the guests as the time for the celebration approached. Some of Jesus' parables would have needed a lot of thought on the part of his hearers. The disciples are always saying, 'Explain the parable of the ... to us.' Not so this one, its meaning is crystal clear to the people and to the leaders.

Jesus' teaching is timeless and applies as much to us today as it did two thousand years ago to his original audience. The beginning is explicit.

²'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.' This is it in a nutshell.

The banquet is the Kingdom of Heaven; the banquet is given in honour of his Son, the long awaited Messiah. To put it another way here is Jesus, God and Man, Messiah, the Anointed One entering into his temple. The promises of God, freely given, are available to everyone. Jesus the Saviour will win those promises for us through love. That is the amazing fact; God has become man at his incarnation to bring the invitation to humanity. The slaves or servants are, as in last week's reading, the prophets sent by God with his message to tell the people to repent and to turn to him and to announce the coming of the Messiah.

Jesus has said that God has sent him to his chosen people, the Jews. "I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." That is true; initially Jesus' mission was to give the good news to the Jews. Jesus is the fulfilment of the law and the prophets.

What happened? So many ignored the invitation sent out by God in his Son. They were preoccupied by their own concerns or prejudices and failed to recognise the Messiah. In fact the religious rulers lead the people astray, they are described as 'blind guides' and 'whited sepulchres'. Throughout history the same has been true, the prophets were abused and killed, the last being John the Baptist. The leaders have rejected Jesus, the cornerstone as we saw last week, the stone on which the building depended. But with that rejection their house is in danger of collapsing. The reference at verse seven fits in well with this. The temple and the city would be destroyed in AD 70; Matthew's Gospel written between AD. 80-90 would be likely to be referring to this catastrophic event.

Jesus broadens his comments from the religious leaders to include all those who have rejected his message,

⁵⁷ 'But Jesus said unto them, 'A prophet is not without honour, but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house.' (Matthew 13)

Jesus has encountered opposition and rejection and he will soon be killed as he had foretold. People have turned away from the most amazing promise of God given in love by Jesus the Messiah. So then God will send his messengers, the disciples and the early followers of Jesus, those who have turned to him and followed loyally into 'the main streets.' God invites all to the wedding banquet now, all whom the Pharisees would despise, the lowly, the sinners, prostitutes and Gentiles. Think of the stories we have heard of Gentiles who have shown great faith and in doing so have shown the Pharisees up! The Canaanite woman, 'Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.' The Centurion who did not even ask Jesus to see his servant but knew his word was enough. Think of the sinners who have followed, like Matthew the tax collector who turned to follow as a disciple. I could go on; the gospels are full of these illustrations. So then all are invited both then and now, all who turn to him are heirs with Christ and inheritors of God's kingdom. As Jesus says at the end of the gospel, 'Go therefore and baptise all nations.'

We need to look now at what at first sight seems a peculiar end to the parable.

¹¹ 'But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹² and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?"

What does this mean? Simply that metaphorically, we all have to put on 'wedding robes', that is, turn over a new leaf; adopt behaviour required by the faith we profess. We are heirs with Jesus of the promises of God but we have to reflect Jesus' way in our own lives. To put on the whole armour of God might be another way of saying it.

To profess faith is only the beginning; to join a church is only the beginning. Our behaviour has to reflect Jesus' teaching; we have to be 'clothed with Christ.' We cannot say one thing and do another, that was the man at the end of the story. Yes sinners are called; we are all called, but to receive God's forgiveness and grace but we must 'turn from sin and turn to Christ' as it says in the baptismal promises. Repentance means to be sorry, to turn and begin again to live in Jesus' way. God's forgiveness is freely given in love to us all but it requires us to say sorry and really mean it and change our ways, anything less is not worthy of the wedding banquet. The promises we are given in Jesus, God incarnate, are so wonderful. How blessed we are to worship the God who walked alongside humans then and walks alongside us now. We have to strive to be worthy of all the wonders of God's wedding banquet.

Jesus has said 'The last shall be first and the first last,' now he ends this parable with,
¹⁴ 'For many are called, but few are chosen.'

They are salutary words for us all, there is no room for anything which is not Jesus' way but they are joyful words too. We are all equal in the sight of God, all equally loved, all inheritors of the Kingdom of God. He knows our inmost thoughts and worries and he walks alongside us.

This parable is summed up in words from John 1

¹⁰ 'He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,'

Jesus' words are targeting those who oppose him. Paul, like Jesus, faced huge opposition, indeed Paul is writing to the Philippians from prison as he says just prior to this passage at 3.17 'Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸ For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears.'

So it was vitally important that these early Christians obeyed Christ's teachings as given by Paul and were of one mind. We remember 'A house divided against itself falls.' This passage begins

¹ 'Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.'

Earlier, in chapter two Paul has spoken of two co-workers, men who have supported him through thick and thin.

¹⁹ 'I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be cheered by news of you.

²⁰ I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. ²¹ All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.' Philippians 2

As Paul has made clear all is not well.

²⁵ 'I think it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus—my brother and co-worker and fellow-soldier, your messenger and minister to my need;' ... he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for those services that you could not give me.'

Paul speaks very fondly of these two men who have worked so hard with him on his mission and supported him. Maybe it is Epaphroditus who is taking this letter to the Philippians. Here in this passage Paul mentions another co-worker Clement.

In the light of this opposition and specifically of Paul's plea to them to be of one mind in Christ it is particularly sad to read the first part of the passage in Philippians 4

² 'I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³ Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel,' These women are praised as having worked with Paul in the work of the gospel. They are members of the church at Philippi but something has gone wrong. It is tempting to think that everything in the garden was lovely in the early church but of course that was not true. We will never know who these women were or what it was that had caused the argument but they really stand as symbols of division in a church. I looked at this in the reflection for Proper 16 when Jesus was talking about forgiveness. This is what I wrote then.

'We must forgive, that is what we are taught, but if a person wilfully refuses to repent and continues with damaging behaviour then they will damage people, a church or any other institution.'

That is the tough bit. If forgiveness is central and Jesus forgave those who were hammering in the nails, then we have to try to do that. But we do not condone bad behaviour which is against Jesus' teaching and we are called on to condemn it and to confront it. You can't make a person stop their unacceptable behaviour but you need to stand up to them. That takes courage; especially when the one at fault is the one with the power be it within an institution or in government.'

Something has gone wrong between these two women, it is not just a simple tiff, it is serious enough for Paul not only to comment on it but to ask that Epaphroditus, (if he is the 'loyal companion' referred to) who will be going to Philippi with this letter, to help them sort it out. They must forgive, forget and get on with the really important thing, serving Christ before this argument gets out of hand and damages the church in Philippi. Paul wants them to be 'in the same mind in the Lord.' Arguments and feuds can destroy a church and Paul knows it. These two women are both worthy followers of Jesus and they must devote their energies to Christ's work and labour in harmony together once more.

The rest of this passage contains some of the most familiar words in the bible. It really is most beautiful. ⁴ 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.' Charles Wesley's hymn, Rejoice the Lord is King, must have been inspired by this. The word rejoice does not just mean make merry it is a deep, deep feeling of sheer happiness that wells over into action, here the service of Jesus. Paul follows this with

⁵ 'Let your gentleness be known to everyone.' Paul wants people to see that Christian behaviour is different. He realised that Christianity is caught as well as taught. We remember the words 'See how these Christians love one another ... they are even prepared to die for each other.' Those words were not idealistic, they were a statement of fact uttered by someone who had witnessed it.

The next part, 'The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not worry about anything,' always makes me, as one of the world's worst worriers, feel guilty. Someone bought me a candle and on the holder it said. 'Worry ends where faith begins,' it is a beautiful sentiment. Jesus has already addressed this in Matthew 6 and Paul addresses it here, do not rely on yourself alone no instead

⁶ '... in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.'

In other words, fully rely on God. Of course we will all have worries as Paul well knows but his advice is, take them to God in prayer. Prayer should be at the centre of a Christian's life, 'If the Lord is with us who can be against us.' The result of prayer is that 'the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.' This is one of the most famous blessings and still used often today. We think of Jesus' first words to the disciples when he appears

to them in the upper room, 'Peace be with you.' That is not just the normal 'Shalom,' Jesus brings the peace of God, which 'surpasses all understanding' and it does still their hearts and minds.

⁸ 'Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.'

These words need to be the focus of the church. It does not mean that a Christian should have their head in the clouds, quite the opposite. A Christian needs to focus and model their lives on all that is good and pure. They need to think not of themselves and their own ambition but of Christ's teaching. It leads on to verse 9

⁹ 'Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.'

Both Paul and Jesus have a way of packing a huge amount of teaching into a sentence. All that Paul has taught them of Jesus' way they are to live out in their lives. It is as simple as 'Love one another as I have loved you.' We are not perfect, the church is not perfect, things go wrong as illustrated by the two ladies at the beginning of the passage but we need to try and keep on trying to live as Jesus taught us to. That is God's commission for us. People need to look at us and see Christian love in action, that is the challenge.

I couldn't think of any better quote to finish with than Paul's words.

'And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.'

