

The Twenty-Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time – YrA – 15 October 2023

Message: *Proclaiming the Gospel*

Creator, Redemer, and Giver of Life, known to us, through creation, community, and mystical communion, may we know the Eternal Word and Way. **Amen.**

Today we come to the third of Jesus's parables following the temple authorities challenge to his authority. Like last week's parable of the vineyard, it is an allegory. The first part is the people of Israel, this time focused on the people rather than the leaders. The second part is a tad disputed in its application, some commentators see it as still applying to Israel, but the more natural reading is to think that it applies to the church.

It is tempting to compare today's parable with the parable of the wedding feast in Luke. However, the two differ on so many points, that we are better to consider the possibility that Jesus used the same theme and retold it for the new context or that the story evolved within the life of the early church. For those who really wish to get lost in text comparison, there is also a version of the parable in the Gospel of St Thomas, one of the many early books that did not make it into our canon of scripture.

So, all that set to rest, what does this parable have to say to us today? The ejection of the guest from the wedding is something of a surprise. It should be noted that both good and bad are invited to the wedding feast. All whom the servants found were invited.

You may have come across the suggestion that wedding hosts in those times gave out wedding robes so the person can't have been invited or is failing in some way to show respect. There is little evidence for this so we probably need a better explanation.

One of the recurring themes of Matthew's gospel is righteousness. Recalling the first story, the two brothers asked to go to the vineyard, it is reasonable to think that being properly clothed is about right actions. All are indeed invited to the wedding feast. With the acceptance of that invitation comes the expectation that we will be clothed in righteousness. That our actions will be a true reflection of our beliefs.

A fortnight ago, I explored how we might reflect that in the welcome that we offer to newcomers and visitors to our services. I know that some of you acted on that, thank you from me, thank you from them too. I hope that even more of you will join in that welcome. One of the great phrases someone suggest for when you are not sure if someone is new was "I'm not sure that we've spoken before." completely avoiding the issue of how long someone may or may not have been attending here.

This week, as we reflect on the parable of the vineyard and this parable, I am going to be a little subversive and ask, "Who are God's servants today inviting all to the Wedding Feast?" The obvious answer is that we, as the body of Christ, are those servants. From these parables, we may take it that we will not always be well treated. This is surly no surprise. The servant King died for us, we are trying to follow in Christ's footsteps, to be servants of the servant king.

We are to go out into the streets and invite everyone to come to the wedding feast of Christ. To do this we need to make sure that we are heard. To which end we need to convey the love of God to all. If we are the embodiment of Christ that must be reflected in all that we do.

Being a part of the body of Christ should be attractive to those outside the church, as it was in the early church. Yet, as we look around us, we can see that younger generations are sparsely represented in the church. Some have captured the vision but for most the message is not coming through.

I have been reading a book by the activist and theologian Brian McLaren, entitled “Do I stay Christian”. It might be considered essential reading for anyone who would like to understand why people are leaving the church, or not drawn to it in the first place; this is the focus of the first part of the book. Brian then looks at why we might stay in the church despite its faults and finally looks at how we might live an authentic life regardless of whether we stay in the church or choose to leave it.

The challenge to us as a church is how do we ensure that we are authentic to what we believe, remember the two brothers, it is by our actions that people will be able to tell what is really on our hearts.

Brian writes from a North American context so some of the points need adjusting for our context but sadly none of them are that far out.

Brian starts with our relationship with Judaism. There are examples of Christians and Jews collaborating but our history is not good. There are even verses of our scriptures that may

be read as antisemitic and the church has regularly persecuted the Jewish people. This is not the way of Christ. We need to form new bonds of kinship.

Brian's second point is the antagonism within the church, between denominations, even within denominations. Christians are quite horrible to one another; few would know we are Christian by our love for one another.

Third reason, Christianity has a terrifying global death toll. A version of our faith was used to justify colonialism and even slavery. In our own country many young people see Christianity as a part of colonisation and therefore something they want nothing to do with.

The fourth, relates to a deep distrust of institutions. The people who climb the ladders of the churches are those who fit and support the institution. Where are the prophetic Christ like voices in the church?

The fifth reason is that the church appears to be as driven by money as any other organisation and the churches with money are the ones with power. Where is the sharing of all things in common so that no one is in need?

Sixth, when we look at our church leadership do we see the diversity we should, in gender, sexuality, race, theology and any other dimension you care to think of. The answer is no.

Seven, because Christianity is stuck. Yes, God's love is constant. However, our understanding of God's creation is ever changing. The Theology of the past needs to be reinterpreted and expressed in a way that conveys what was intended, the invincible and unending love of God.

Eight, and related, we talk of transformation in the good news that we share, how is it that the Church has so utterly failed to show that transformation in its own life. We should be leading the way in bringing justice and mercy to the world.

Nine, now I hope this is not true of us as a community, but many Christians will not engage with science and with the deep and creative thinking of philosophers and academics. Many here do engage but that is not our public image. People are still surprised to discover that I have a physics degree.

Ten, Christianity is a sinking ship, or as Brian puts it “Shrinking Ship of Wrinkling People”. There is truth in this but there are a surprising number of younger people who are a part of our church and even more, who pass through, if we were to make them welcome, I am sure many would be delighted to be a part of this part of the body of Christ.

You’ll be glad to hear, I am not going to cover the rest of the book on this occasion. But, I do want to leave with you the final destination of the book.

What are we to do about this? I was delighted to find Brian drawing on my favourite verse of the Bible (Micha 6.8).

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

Whether we are Christian or of another faith or even of no faith, there are many, many, people who would be able to agree to this statement or at least its sentiment. If we can simply be more fully human, as God intended, this will be the

kind of community which was seen in the early church. A community where our actions as well as our words proclaim the love of God and where all genuinely hear the invitation to the wedding feast.

Amen. Amen. Amen.