

Sermon for Sunday 15 October 2023

Revd Graham Naylor, Curate

Isaiah 25.1-9; Psalm 23; Philippians 4.1-9; Matthew 22.1-14

May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Please do be seated.

So, over the last three Sundays, including today, our lectionary has looked at three parables that Jesus spoke to the religious leaders. Not last Sunday, but the Sunday before, Simon looked with us at the first one, and of course, you all remember exactly what he said about that, don't you? Last week we looked at the second one. Well, we didn't hear, because we had harvest; but if you were at Preston St. Mary, you know that we looked at the second one; and this week we've got the third one, and Preston St. Mary have got their harvest today, so they're not looking at it, so what I've done is decided that last week at Preston we'd look at all three, and this week in Lavenham, we'll look at all three; well we'll go for a nod to one a couple of weeks ago when Simon spoke, and we will be through by about week Tuesday, is that OK? No? No, I know some of the choir, you've got to get off to Preston St Mary, haven't you, for harvest? Yeah.

So these three parables, the last of which we heard today, in Matthew's Gospel, of the wedding banquet, or the invitation to the wedding banquet, sits in a block of teaching in Matthew's Gospel, which starts with the triumphal entry, what we know as Palm Sunday, when Jesus, with the Galilean crowd who'd followed him from his teaching ministry, come down from Bethany into Jerusalem and where they expect Jesus as this Messiah figure to go to Herod's palace and overthrow the Roman occupation; but he doesn't, he goes a different direction and he goes to the temple and he overturns the tables of the money changers.

Now, we've not read that because we do that at Easter. It's a bit disjointed, isn't it? Are you keeping up with me? Hello, church, are we awake this morning? Anybody crawling to bed any later than me at 2.30 after clearing up the concert last night and getting home? If I'm awake, you can be awake. Okay. That wasn't a poor me, that was just going, wake up.

So we have this situation where the Galilean people have come into Jerusalem with Jesus thinking this is the Messiah figure, this is the chosen one of Israel, God's promised Messiah who is going to free Israel from its captivity, a bit like Moses getting Israel out of Egypt.

Now, the temple speaks of Israel's calling to be a people who will create an environment where God and the people worshipping God can meet. That's what temple is, in simple language. It's like what we do as church and in a church building, but not necessarily in a church building. It is where the deity and the worshipper can meet. Simple definition of temple. And Israel had been called to create this environment where God and people could meet, and people who weren't part of the people of God could see that happening, and see how good it was to be in relationship with God, but they hadn't done that.

So, Jesus; I've got to be very careful here when I speak of Israel, particularly today, these terrible events in Israel and Gaza, but I'm talking about Israel as the people of God, I'm not talking about a land, although in biblical terms, the land was all part of the covenant and I'm not talking about the modern state of Israel; so just with that caveat.

The next thing in the sequence after Jesus overturns the tables of the money changers, because the temple wasn't operating properly, is he curses a fig tree. He's basically saying, this fig tree is not bearing fruit, it's cursed, it dies - symbolic, that Israel had not done what they were meant to do, they had not borne fruit and therefore the temple was going to be destroyed. That happened in 70 AD. And then the religious leaders, because he goes into the temple and he starts preaching the kingdom of God and demonstrating it, he's teaching about God and he is healing people. And they go to him and say, by what authority do you do this? And there's a bit of a conundrum, because they are basically saying, we're the religious leaders here, we're the ones that have the authority to say what happens in the temple. And you're not a trained rabbi, you're not a trained priest, you're not of the priestly line. What right have you got to do this?

I don't know how I would feel; I asked Simon the question - he's not here today, so I can't throw it at him. But, churchwardens, how would you feel if somebody who wasn't ordained or licenced, as Peter is, came in and started trying to take the service this morning? Churchwardens may say, probably do a better job.

But Jesus was just completely subversive. He's coming in and in theory didn't have authority, but he had God's authority and they're questioning him and they say, 'Whose authority do you have?' And he said to them, they must have been doing similar things; he asked them by what authority they were ministering and he asks about John the Baptist, where did his authority come from? And the leaders are in a bind here. They are in a real political situation, because if they say it's from God, he'll say, 'Why didn't you believe him and follow him?' and 'Why don't you believe in me?' And if they say that he doesn't have authority from God, they've got a problem, because the people recognise John as a prophet; they're between a rock and a hard place, and they won't answer him. And Jesus says, I won't answer you either.

But then what he does is he holds a mirror up in the three parables. Have you ever been in that situation where you've had somebody effectively hold a mirror up to you? About your conduct, the way you're behaving. They've not made a direct accusation, because if you do that, people get defensive, but they just hold a mirror up. Oh, how uncomfortable is that? Who here has been in that situation? Hello. Most of us. Thank you. David, you can just discreetly put a finger up; who's been in the situation? Either yourself or somebody else has just held a mirror up and you've gone, 'Oh.'

Think of the story of David, Bathsheba and the prophet Nathan. David committed adultery with Bathsheba. It's the first UFO, I think it might be the only UFO that's mentioned in the Bible; Bathsheba is an Unclad Female Object; and David sees her, commits adultery, has her husband killed, has an illegitimate child by her. And Nathan the prophet comes with a story about a rich man who had everything, a poor man who had very little, and the rich man took even what the poor man had and says,

'David, what would you do about this?' He said, 'That man should die.' And Nathan says 'That man's you...'

And what Jesus does in these three parables of the two sons, one who would go and said he would work in a vineyard; 'vineyard' - speaking of Israel, God's people; 'I'll go work in the vineyard, Dad', but didn't go. And that speaks of the leaders who weren't doing what they should have been doing and another son who said, 'I won't go', but then did and did the right thing.

And then last week we had the wicked tenants; again symbolising the religious leaders, and they didn't hand over the harvest. And the owner of the vineyard sends his workers to go and collect the harvest and they kill them. And he says, 'I'll send my son and they kill the son. And the leaders realise that Jesus was speaking about them.

And then he tells them a third parable; he's really rubbing it in, isn't he? If you don't get it with the first one, if you don't get it with the second one, you'll get it with the third one. Maybe it's a bit appropriate, we have the invitation to a wedding today when we're celebrating Michael and Barbara's 60th wedding. The King has made this invitation to the great and good to come to a wedding banquet. This is speaking symbolically of the day when Jesus will be the groom, the church will be the bride; and there is a wedding banquet. You can read that in the Book of Revelation. But what happens in this context is the invitation goes out with plenty of warning, with an RSVP, and then when the RSVPs have come in, they worked out how many bulls, how many sheep, how many goats they needed to kill and cook. They didn't just go down to the supermarket and get prepackaged stuff off the shelves. It was a big event and it took time and then when the preparations were done, they said, 'Right, we're ready now and you can arrive.'

And those who had been invited didn't turn up and they made excuses. I don't have time to go into it this morning, but the excuses are ridiculous because they're not on the spur of the moment things. They're things that would have been planned for a long time in a culture that was an honour based culture. This was so disrespectful to the king and the king is angry to his servants. Just go and get anybody. Barbara, Michael, can you imagine your wedding reception? People didn't turn up and you went into streets of Lavenham - just anybody, come in; if you're a bit hungry, come in.

We're having a wedding reception and some people who are meant to be here can't do us the honour of being here. That's again, speaking of the religious leaders, they were not doing what God wanted them to do. And then people who were not honoured guests, who had no status, were invited, speaks of this broad invitation that God gives to those of us who have no status, who have no right to be in the people of God. But 'come in', and the people come.

But there's one person, and it's noticed that he's not got a wedding robe. Now, in this culture, this would just be really your best clothes, ideally white. For those of you who are being confirmed next week, a reminder, something white if you can. But all that was expected was to wear your best clothes cleaned and somebody had not done that; again, dishonouring. The invitation of God, brothers and sisters, is broad. You come with nothing except the expectation that you come appropriately.

So, as they say, the invitation of the gospel is not without condition. That condition is a cleaned up life, not by what you do, but by what Jesus can do for you. We've talked about the feast and the wedding in Revelation, and we hear that there will be those who are part of the people of God, and they're dressed in white because they have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb.

Israel failed to do what they were called to do. The temple was destroyed. And Jesus now says that the new temple is in himself and in the people of God; this is the new people of God; but it's a people of God who are called to change lives.

So, brothers and sisters, that's the challenge I leave you with. Will you accept an invitation to a wedding feast? Maybe you want to think about that between now and when we come to the feast that we will celebrate round the Lord's table; what it means to be the people of God, because we have come and accepted that invitation.

Amen.