

The wedding invitation

May the words that I speak and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable to you Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

A wedding invitation.

It's always exciting to be invited to a wedding, especially if it's a Royal one.

When Kate Middleton married Prince William people asked us if we had been invited. Pete took this to heart and had a huge red banner printed, on it in gold capital letters were the words Middleton House. It stretched right across the front of our cottage in London.

[Admittedly the cottage was very small]. Our whole lane about 12 cottages hung out bunting and we had a street party on the drive of one of our neighbours.

At the moment it must be heart breaking for couples who have been planning big a wedding celebration this year, when they can only have 15 guests to share the celebration with.

Well back to our story, it's about a King who sends out invitations to his sons' wedding breakfast. No postal service 2000 years ago so the invitations have to be delivered personally.

The response of those who received the invitations goes against all our experience of weddings, as it would have done of those who originally listened to the story.

So let's first consider the poor messengers, I'm sure you know the saying "don't shoot the messenger". Well 2 sets of messengers are sent out and they are either ignored or they are beaten or worse still killed.

Meanwhile those invited to the banquet get on with their everyday lives.

At the end of the previous chapter Matthew indicates who many of Jesus audience were, they were the chief priests and Pharisees who were collecting evidence against Jesus so that they could have him arrested. They considered themselves to be Gods chosen ones above the ordinary Jewish people.

It would be clear to them that in this story God is represented by the King and his messengers were the Prophets, who down through the ages had tried to call the Jewish nation back to God and to his plans for them. The prophets were frequently ignored or even put to death for the message they tried to deliver.

But why would people in fact Gods chosen people the Jews especially their religious leaders, choose to behave in this way? Why would they want to reject the invitation to partake in the banquet they were invited to?

Look at what the story says they were too busy with their own lives to consider what God wanted to offer them.

We could ask ourselves these questions how busy are we with our own lives, things we consider to be important, how much time do we give directly to God?

An earlier picture of this banquet is given in our O.T reading morning from the prophet Isaiah.

“On this mountain the Lord of Hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well matured wines And he will destroy y on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever”

In this prophecy we along with the Jews are invited, because Jesus through his death on the cross and his resurrection has removed the shroud of sin that’s separated all of us from God. He died on the Mt Zion so that Gods kingdom could be established for everyone.

But the story continues and according to Matthew reveals a vengeful God or king who sends troops into the city to destroy it and its population, because they have ignored the invitation.

This does not sound like the God Jesus has revealed to us in the rest of his teaching.

William Barclay suggest that this sentence [in v7] has been added later by Matthew himself, because at the time he was writing his gospel, Israel had been invaded by a Roman Army and Jerusalem including the temple had been raised to the ground.

The Jews of the time would have seen this event as a punishment from God for their past misbehaviour.

And going back to the actual invitation. Most wedding invitations today come with a wedding list of presents the bride and groom would like to receive, from 6 egg cups to a dinner service.

Likewise with God's invitation what did he want from his chosen people?

It wasn't material gifts, look at what one of his messengers the prophet Amos said on His[Gods] behalf, 500 years earlier

"I hate and despise your Festivals,
even though you offer me your burnt offerings, I will not accept them.

Seek good not evil

That you may live.

Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream"

The gift God wanted was the love of his people, to be close to them as expressed their sincere worship and in the way their everyday lives showed their love and concern for their neighbours.

Their worship was often like the response of the wedding guests they only attended when it suited them and on special occasions if they weren't doing something else.

In the second part of the story more messengers go out to the city gates and invite anyone they can find to the feast.

This was, at the time of Jesus an area where foreigners would congregate, as they might not be welcome in the central part of the

town. It was also a place for the people who had been rejected by society for the work they performed [for example tax collectors] or the disabilities they had.

So the banquet hall was filled up with what most of the Jews would see as the riffraff of society.

And this is where we again symbolically join the narrative.

We are those who are now invited to come JUST AS WE ARE to be part of the banquet and share in God's love and compassion.

Billy Graham expressed this well when he said

"God's love is unchangeable. He knows exactly what we are and loves us anyway"

A similar message is found a hymn I am sure you are all familiar with which David is going to play for us later

Just as I am, without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me
and that Thou bidst me come to Thee
Oh Lamb of God I come.

And now we come to another difficult part of the story.

The king singles out one of these guests and enquires why the man has not bothered to change his clothes before coming to the feast. His garb is considered to be disrespectful as a guest at the feast.

Perhaps we could see it like this, the clothes are like our lives we can't say we are now part of God's family if we don't seek to change our lives and follow the example of Jesus.

Paul explains this clearly in his letter to the Christians in Philippi which was read to us this morning.

He explains how we should live our new lives as Christians, if we have accepted the Kings invitation

“Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable.....think about these things. [And keep on doing them]”

At this moment in time that love and unequivocal invitation can be helpful to us, when we may find it difficult to look positively into the future.

What do we have to bring to the banquet?

Nothing except ourselves and the desire to share whatever we can with those around us.

This pandemic has highlighted the divisions within our society which are going to need healing. If you have been watching the news then you will have seen Young people saying perhaps rightly, I’m alright so why should I accept restrictions on my behaviour. Even if I catch Covid it won’t affect me more than a mild cold.

And as for older people who don’t have the fear of losing their jobs, going into debt and for- fitting their homes, well if I hunker down hopefully the virus will pass me by.

Finally as an encouragement to us at this time I would like to end with a few words from Pauls’ letter which we heard earlier on

Which I have paraphrase for today

THE LORD IS NEAR. Try not to worry and pray continually and the peace of God which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen