

PENTECOST 19A, 11-10-2020 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Exodus 32.1-14; Psalm 106; Philippians 4.1-9; *Matthew 22.1-14*

*Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."*

Last week's reading from Matthew's gospel was another parable- about a vineyard, and some very bad tenants. Today we hear Jesus still talking to the Pharisees and chief priests, the religious leaders of the day, and telling them another parable.

This one is more confusing, and some scholars have wondered whether the story as we have it is actually some bits of various stories that have been put together.

One likened this parable to a car that's been made out of lots of bits of other cars.... or maybe a stained glass window, made from pieces of coloured glass from other windows.

The parable raises more questions than it answers. Why wouldn't people come to the prince's wedding reception? Why did they kill some of the slaves who delivered the invitations? And why did the king overreact so violently, burning a whole city?

The story goes on to say that people were dragged in off the streets to attend the party; but when the king noticed a person who wasn't wearing a wedding robe, he had another major hissy fit. How could someone just brought in unexpectedly have a special wedding robe to wear?

It doesn't make a lot of sense, which is why there is the theory that this might be fragments of other stories that have been put together.

Luke tells a similar story in his gospel, and his version does make more sense. In Luke's version, the parable tells of a great dinner to which many were invited, but all made excuses about why they couldn't come. So the master sent his slaves out into the streets to bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame so they could enjoy the dinner, because the invited guests didn't want to come.

The point of the parable, which is made so simply in Luke's gospel, is that when God invites you in but you are too busy or can't be bothered, then God will just keep on inviting others. Remember, Jesus was talking to the religious leaders of his day, people who thought they had the monopoly on God, and on how to get in God's good books.

Jesus was warning them to listen to him when he spoke about being right with God, because if they wouldn't accept his invitation then God would invite other people- the ones the chief priests and Pharisees looked down on as 'unworthy sinners'.

Matthew's telling of the story is much more complex and perhaps tries to make too many points; and I'm sure some of the subtleties are not clear to us, all these years later.

The idea of God's kingdom being like a great banquet or a party was well known in Jesus' day and should be familiar to us as well.

Remember the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm- 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want'? It says, 'You spread a table before me in the face of those who trouble me; you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup shall be full.' This is a promise, that God will be with us always to comfort, protect and nourish us.

When we meet together to celebrate the Eucharist, we are enacting that promise in a way that looks back to the Last Supper, in the past, and forward to heaven- at the same time as it is happening now, in our present.

We share a cup of wine and eat a morsel of bread, which may not seem like much of a banquet: but it is a foretaste, and a remembering, and it is feeding us now in a real sense because Jesus is here in the breaking of the bread.

We are to accept God's gifts in joyful humility- not like those people Jesus was so cross with, who flaunted their religiosity and scorned 'common' people.

We are not better than people who don't go to church, or don't believe in anything: we are grateful. We are blessed because God loves us- and we KNOW that God loves us. That's the difference.

There used to be a bumper sticker that said, 'Please be patient with me: God isn't finished with me yet!' It's a cliché but it's true. None of us is perfect (are we??) but we ask God to work with us so we can be better people.

Yesterday was the first day of Mental Health Week in WA, which has been running for more than 50 years and is coordinated by the Western Australian Association for Mental Health (WAAMH), with the support of the Government of Western Australia, Mental Health Commission and Lotterywest.

In Biblical times, illness was thought to be caused by demons, evil spirits, which had to be cast out or exorcised. The idea of illness being caused by bacteria or viruses, a poor diet or genetic factors was of course unknown.

The concept of mental health or illness would have been very strange to people until quite recently. As we have learnt more about illness in general so our ways of dealing with it have changed.

While we understand much more about the things that help us to stay healthy and the things that can make us sick, many of us still don't know very much about mental health and illness. There is still stigma attached to it, and discrimination endured by people with a diagnosis of mental illness. When you consider that it is now believed that one person in four will suffer some kind of mental illness during their life, it isn't exactly uncommon!

Just as Christians are not immune to diseases like heart disease, diabetes and so on, neither of course are we immune to mental illness. People of faith can be diagnosed with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression or any other mental illness. In fact, a Christian person may find such an illness particularly hard to endure because of the kind of teaching that insists they should always be happy, and if they had enough faith they would get better. Which is just cruel.

As a community, we aim to follow the teachings of Jesus- who loved and accepted the lost, the lonely, the bewildered and everyone who wanted to be with him. So we too need to include and support and care for anyone who asks.

God's Spirit within us enables us to love and helps us not to judge. God loves us and expects us to pass on that love- so let's do it!

The Lord be with you.