

## **Sermon**

Jesus is coming to the end of his life, and he knows it. A few days prior in the Matthew's telling of the story, Jesus had come up to the temple mount with his followers. Together they had occupied the entire temple complex, driven out the traders and money changers, and halted the afternoon sacrifices and temple services. But that is not all. Matthew tells us that Jesus made the temple a centre for healing. The blind and the lame were all welcomed into the temple precincts to be healed of their infirmities. These people were not supposed to be there at all. King David himself had banned them from the temple 800 years ago, when he decreed that the sick and lame should never be allowed to step foot on the temple mount. Imagine the stir created when Jesus welcomes these people into the heart of temple establishment! Having turned the temple into a place of healing Jesus brazenly strides into the temple every day in Holy Week, teaching people about the Kingdom of God and proclaiming his message of forgiveness and compassion. Needless to say, the authorities are apoplectic with rage. But they are also powerless to act for the crowds hang on his every word and cheer him on.

As Jesus faces his own end times, we observe Jesus energised, focused and empowered by the Spirit of God to pass on his most important teaching about the kingdom of God. The atmosphere is toxic, to be sure, with the religious leaders finding every possible way to attack him and undermine his confidence. But Jesus offers striking parables; word pictures describing the kingdom. Christianity as always had an orientation toward the future. Far from being a static reality, the kingdom is God's future rushing toward us like an express train. In other words God acts to make the promise of heaven a concrete reality that we experience now. The parables of Jesus borrow old metaphors for heaven and call us to work with God to open these possibilities up to one another, for as we do this, we find Jesus is alive in our midst, still offering the costly love of God to us, still offering his life for us.

The banquet is one of the oldest and most common images of heaven in the bible. The banquet of God was spoken of by Isaiah centuries earlier. Isaiah imagined God laying out a feast at which all the people of the world would gather. At this feast the food would be the best we can imagine; mouth-watering food, wines to die for. All the

peoples of the earth would be welcome and the food will be freely given, an experience of God's grace. Isaiah was comparing God's feast with the feast of empire. The feast of the empire was the food of military force, harsh taxes imposed on the poor, unfair trading practices favouring the wealthy, expensive food out of the reach of many, the sour wine of violence and bloodshed. God's feast, on the other hand, would be an experience of grace. All we would need to do is open our hearts to receive it.

Today, Jesus picks up Isaiah's theme of the banquet. The parable opens with God giving a banquet in honour of his son's wedding. The wedding is a picture of the union of God and humanity brought about through the person of Jesus Christ. In the banquet, God and humanity form a special bond of fellowship. God and people eat together and become one. They are united together in a Holy Communion. The Eucharist in which we participate week by week is the place where we participate in this banquet, and taste the goodness of heaven.

So God sends out invitations to selected guests. But the invited guests, the inheritors of the Covenant of Moses, refuse to come. God is enraged by this refusal. But with God this anger is turned into grace. Now the length to which God is prepared to go to extend this invitation to everyone becomes apparent. Jesus shows how the refusal on the part of the preferred guests makes God even more generous to everyone else. The result is an invitation to all peoples to be part of the new temple of living stones on the temple mount. Everyone from the highways and byways is invited to be guests of God. For us the call of God is simple. All we have to do is to make everyone welcome without exception; to offer hospitality to all thus building a Christian community which is a living parable of the gospel; for in allowing everyone to be at home with us we become participants in God's vision to offer a slice of heaven on earth.

But now Matthew provides a second, rather awkward parable about the guest with inappropriate clothes. Suddenly, it seems, God is being unfair. Why should we have sympathy for the king who worried about what these people are wearing? After all, he has invited the waifs and strays, the poor and the outcast from the highways and byways! How can they be expected to have the right clothes? This is not the

Christchurch casino where we turn people away for wearing jeans. Why is God suddenly worried about dress standards? *What's this about wearing the right clothes in the kingdom of God?* Does God mean us to wear our Sunday best to church? Should women wear hats and men shave their heads?

The key to this story is, in fact, the forgotten wedding garment. Here Jesus is drawing on another biblical metaphor with deep roots in the memory of God's people. The Old Testament the prophets often talked about putting on the garments of righteousness. St Paul's modified this when he talked about putting on the Lord Jesus as if putting on a garment. To the Galatians he writes, "For as many of you who are baptised into Christ have put on Christ, or have worn Christ like a garment." The metaphor of putting on appropriate clothes turns up all through the bible, and is applied to baptism, the sacramental putting on of Christ.

This parable is directed squarely at those of us who have become proprietorial, gate keepers in the Kingdom of God presuming to put up boundaries on behalf of God, making the banquet smaller by limiting who can come. In other words, this parable is aimed at Jesus' opponents who wore clothes incompatible with the Kingdom while presuming to know the will of God. God calls us to come clothed with the deeds of Christian discipleship - our acts of justice and mercy, our acts of compassion, kindness, and patience. We are to come with clothes of inclusion; inclusion of women, foreigners, aliens, the poor, the blind and the lame. Whereas the old temple excluded all those groups, the new temple of Jesus body would be a living fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah. It will be open to all, all will find a home, a place to belong and be nurtured.

God wants us, the people of God, to be a sign of heaven on earth. That means we will have to wear clothes that look quite odd in our world of consumerism and acquisitional greed. In our prayer we need to ask God to show us the clothes we are wearing. Do we have any clothes on at all? If God turned up now for an inspection would he find us completely naked? Can we say that we are wearing the deeds of authentic Christian discipleship, of mercy and compassion and forgiveness? When we are baptised we say yes to God, and we are invited to put on new clothes which are the mind of Christ.

That means following his way of thinking and speaking and acting in the world so that we open to others an experience of Jesus, which is also a touch of heaven on earth. As we do, we discover with St Paul that God supplies every need of ours in Christ; that Christ is our spiritual food, our feast of bread and wine. As we discover this, we share in the joy and fulfilment which is the Kingdom of God

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