

Sermon – Matt 22.1-10 (Isaiah 25.6-9)

Our Gospel reading this morning is much darker than Luke's version of this parable of the Great Banquet. In Luke's story the invited guests do all come up with reasons to get out of going to the party, but in this version, they don't just give polite excuses, they respond with mockery, murder and mayhem.

Moreover, in Matthew this is followed by an overwhelmingly violent reaction from the would-be host, destroying both the murderers and their city, before he goes on to invite others from the thoroughfares into the feast. And even then, we are not left with the hall full of guests and a happy ending – there is a bizarre twist at the end when one of the guests who has arrived without a “wedding garment” is bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness for weeping and gnashing of teeth.

So what is it all about? It's not exactly a happy, joyful tale for a celebration like today of Harvest. But taken in context it does offer a message of hope as well as of warning.

In our Old Testament reading from Isaiah we hear God's promise for all of a welcome into his kingdom. The picture is of a feast of rich food, prepared for all peoples. The best meats and finest wines will be offered and the “shroud” that covers all people will be destroyed. Death – the enemy of all – will be swallowed up for ever and everyone's tears will be wiped away. This is a vision of universal salvation, of happiness for all with God eternally. And this is the picture which would have come into Jesus' hearers' minds when he began this parable of the great feast. So what he is doing in these violent touches is to shock people – make them think instead of taking things for granted.

God's original invited guests were the people of Israel, who have turned their backs on his generosity and murdered his messengers – the prophets - sent to invite them to his kingdom. Jesus' hearers would have realised that and understood his message – that the invitation would go out instead to those outside the Jewish nation. But I think there is also a message for us nowadays too.

The point is that it is not only the people of Israel who failed to accept the invitation – people from **everywhere** are still doing so **now**. In terms of the story, this reaction is crazy – why pass up on the offer of a spread like that - free food and drink? And in the same way it is equally crazy that people pass up on God's free offer of love and forgiveness and eternal life in his kingdom. Why do people refuse such an offer?

One set of people in the story seem to refuse because they want to carry on with their business uninterrupted and that is often the problem. People don't consciously reject God – it's more a question of putting the wrong things first, like material wealth and security before spiritual. God's invitation isn't exactly torn up but, as it were, slips to the bottom of the pile and gets lost sight of, squeezed out of consideration. We can always go to church another week, pray another day, but "another time" never comes. Time slips by and the wrong set of values and way of life is built up so the invitation is never accepted and we never get to the party.

The other set respond more angrily and violently to the invitation, as if they feel insulted. There are people who don't like having their way of life questioned or challenged, or perhaps their pride won't allow them to accept things offered freely. And perhaps their nature makes them so blind that they cannot see and understand real goodness even when it is in front of them for the taking.

But I do wonder if sometimes the reason people don't respond to the invitation is because of the **way** it is offered. When we go out as God's messengers, do we make his invitation seem attractive. We can sometimes make God's offer sound very negative, like a list of Don'ts rather than something life-fulfilling. And I'm afraid our lives as well as our words can put others off. If people don't want to be the kind of people we are, then they won't want to follow the faith we profess.

It's interesting that the man who is not in the correct wedding clothes is thrown out. Is our appearance appropriate for God's party? Do we radiate joy and hope and praise? Do we look as if we are celebrating - guests at the greatest feast ever? If we can do this, then God's invitation will seem irresistible – people will want whatever we have.

The other challenge is that we really have to show that we believe that God's invitation is for all – that those outcasts on the thoroughfares of life, whom no one ever wants and are welcome nowhere else, **are** welcome in his church and his family and immeasurably dear to him.

That is the message of Harvest – God's blessings are the gifts of his amazing love and there for all to share for all eternity. We need to remember this not only at Harvest time but always.