

## **Recorded Service – Sunday 11 October 2020**

### **for Church of Scotland Congregations in Upper Tay Valley and Tenandry**

**(Rev. Robert Nicol)**

Welcome to this week's broadcast service for the congregations of the Upper Tay Valley and Tenandry. Welcome to all who live in our parishes, and to those who are joining us from further afield. We are glad to have you worshipping with us this morning.

What is heaven like? That's a question we all ask ourselves from time to time, if we believe there is a heaven. Put very simply, it is the place where God is. But that's not enough of an explanation. The Bible tells us that it is not the same as here, because in heaven there is no more dying, or suffering, or tears, or violence, or injustice. All that will be behind us. But maybe we wonder if it might be so different from what we are used to here that we won't fit in; or that it will simply be boring, without the tension between highs and lows that characterise life here on earth. With our limitations, our brains cannot fully understand what is to come, but we are given some descriptions, and pictures of what heaven will be like. The picture that the Bible uses most often I think is of a banquet. It occurs several times in the Old Testament, but also throughout the New. Jesus used this idea in a number of parables, one of which we are going to look at today.

A banquet was a great big meal for lots of people. It suggests plentiful food and drink, a joyous atmosphere of celebration, good company and conversation. And of course, there has to be a host – the one who has invited us, who greets us at the door, who is delighted to see that we've come, and who will make sure we have everything we need, and more; who will surprise us with his generosity and kindness. That's the picture we have in the Bible of how God welcomes his people.

One of the places this imagery occurs, and certainly one of the best known, is in Psalm 23, "The Lord's my shepherd", where King David, who must have thrown quite a few banquets himself, says: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows".

In this version by the Scottish Festival Singers, conducted by Ian McCrorie and with John Langdon on the organ, it is sung, not to the familiar Crimond, but to the marvellous Orlington, a tune composed by Glasgow merchant and amateur musician, John Campbell in 1854. For some inexplicable reason, in this recording they have missed out the verse about the banquet!

### **"The Lord's my shepherd" (CH4 15)**

#### **Prayer**

Let us pray.

Our God and our Father,

We set aside this special time of our week, to turn our thoughts towards you, in our worship, in our prayers, in our contemplation of your word.

We praise you, our good shepherd, who sought and found us when we were lost, and brought us safely into the fold. You have always provided for us; you have calmed us when we've been stressed; you have walked with us through the dark times; you have shown us your love in so many blessings.

We need this special time, when we can come aside with you. A quiet time when we bring back to mind eternal truths; when we can re-set our thinking towards your priorities; when we are assured again that

you love us and that you have invited us to come into your presence; when we remember that we are part of your whole family of the church, worshipping with our brothers and sisters in the faith.

Forgive us, Father, for those things we have done wrong; our forgetfulness of you; our neglect of the good works you have given us to do; our easy return to past patterns of bad behaviour; our quickness to judge and condemn others, while ignoring our own failings. These and more we confess before you. We ask again that you will forgive us as we come in humility before you, not pleading any goodness of our own, but resting solely on our faith in Jesus, who suffered and died that we might be free.

In the name of our saviour, the risen Lord Jesus, we offer these prayers.

Amen

Our readings this morning come from Linda and Paul Gillett at their home in Fearnan. The first reading is one of the Old Testament descriptions of the heavenly banquet, taken from the book of the prophet, Isaiah. The second is one of the stories Jesus told which incorporates this image of the banquet.

**Reading 1: Isaiah 25:6-9** (read by Linda Gillett)

**Reading 2: Matthew 22:1-14** (read by Paul Gillett)

## Sermon

In the last couple of services that I've recorded, I have been speaking on parables of Jesus. It's just the way it has worked out in the set readings for these Sundays, with Matthew being the Gospel for this year. I have been leaving the story of Moses to Neil to follow through. When I landed up with this week's parable though, I wondered whether I'd done the right thing. Because this one is quite horrid.

I've said before that the parables are stories which are to be set alongside the truth, to illustrate a point in a memorable way. No single parable contains the whole of the Gospel, and we have to be careful not to analyse them too much, as though every detail is laden with meaning. And trying to decide who each of the characters represents can lead us to wrong conclusions, particularly about God. They are meant to challenge our assumptions, to set us thinking and discussing, to help us on the way to understanding God and his purposes and methods. They use exaggeration sometimes, and present characters and situations we can find difficult to accept. Always, we have to go back to the fundamental truths of the Gospel.

Here we have a story of a king who wanted to throw a wedding party for his son. The invitations had already gone out, and now he sent his servants out to gather them in. But they wouldn't come. He sent another set of servants, saying it was now urgent: all the food had been prepared and was ready to serve. But some of the guests just shrugged their shoulders and said they were too busy with their own business, or with shopping. Other guests reacted violently, and beat up and killed the servants. The king was furious, and sent out his army to kill the rebels and destroy their city. He then sent his servants out into the highways and by-ways to round up everybody they could find, good and bad, and bring them in to the feast. The hall was filled to capacity.

But then the king spotted one guest who wasn't dressed right for the occasion. He challenged this person, who had no answer, so he commanded his servants to tie up the guy and throw him out into the darkness, the place of eternal regret.

There are bits of that we like. The idea that people who consider themselves entitled to favour, who think they have a right to a place at the banquet, get their come-uppance, and the disregarded, the people without social status, they get invited in instead.

So far, so good. But there are bits we don't like, that we would rather gloss over. The extreme violence, for one thing. And I guess most of us don't much like the saying at the end: "For many are called, but few are chosen."

And then there is the problem of how this parable has been used. It starts from assumptions on who the characters represent. As soon as we hear that there is a king, we're inclined to think this must represent God. He has a son, who must then be Jesus. there's going to be a wedding and, if we know our scriptures, we might think this is a representation of the heavenly banquet, where those who have responded to Christ's call receive their reward. That means that the original guests must be the Jews, and particularly their leaders, who rejected Christ as their Messiah, with the call going instead to Gentiles, which is what most of us are. The servants are the prophets, and maybe specifically John the Baptist, and Jesus himself, whose message was rejected, in the end, violently.

That is what we might call the 'traditional' interpretation of the parable. And we can see how it would have spoken to the early Christians, for whom Matthew wrote his Gospel, struggling as they were with being thrown out of the synagogues, rejected by their former religious compatriots and being an oppressed minority within the mighty Roman Empire. They would have clung to the reassurance that God was on their side.

The bit about the guy in the wrong clothes is then about righteousness – being right with God. This person had been invited in, but wasn't living the Christian life properly. This fits with the idea expressed in the parables that the church will contain genuine believers and imposters: those who do not have the right beliefs or live the life they should. Some commentators think this bit was a different parable originally, put here by Matthew to emphasise that, although all are called to be followers of Jesus, discipleship means that we don't stay as we are, but we learn to live lives worthy of that calling, through our good deeds and obedience to Christ's commands. In that sense, the banquet is not a free-for all.

It is but a short step from this approach to misuse this parable – as it has been, down through the centuries. It has been used to justify oppression and violence towards Jewish people, taking a cue from the violent king. An Indian theologian, R S Sugirtharajah, has shown how this and other scriptures were used by British imperialists to justify their perceived supremacy over the Indian population. If you assume that you and your nation are amongst those who were summoned in from the highways and by-ways, and the other lot were not, then you can justify your oppression of those others.

This is a time when the Christian church is being called to account for its history. In amongst the very many good things which can be said about what the church has done on the past 2000 years, there are also shameful episodes of abuse and oppression, justified by particular interpretations of passages such as these. It is incumbent on us today to be honest about the past, to hold on to what has been good, and to reckon with what has been bad. We have to reject interpretations which justify anti-Semitism, or slavery, or the worst aspects of imperial rule.

To start with, we can look at the puzzles and absurdities in this story. This might persuade us that we cannot take it too literally.

First is the strange thing that the people invited wouldn't come to the feast. The first time we were involved in organising a wedding, we were wondering how many of our invitees would be able to come. A friend who had done this before told us not to worry about that – almost everyone would come, because it is such a special thing. Now, if you add in that this is a royal wedding – who would turn it down? Who could imagine that they had something more important to do? OK – I know some of you out there are republicans and would be delighted to turn to down such an invitation. But for everyone to say "no", as in this story – does that tell us something about the king and what they thought of him? They really don't want to be at his party.

Then maybe we see why. The king is enraged and turns his army indiscriminately on the city of the rebels and destroys it. Violence is met with more extreme violence.

But before all that the dinner was ready. In that hot climate, with no refrigeration, once the meat was ready, it had to be served.

Then there is the apparent unfairness that someone who was rounded up from the streets and brought into the banquet, is suddenly cast out because he is in the wrong clothes. I'm sure most of us have had that experience of turning up for an event and finding we are in the wrong clothes. We didn't get the message that it was a formal affair, and we've dressed casual; or vice versa. Or worse, someone told us it was fancy dress, and it wasn't. An uncomfortable experience, but isn't the king's reaction completely over the top?

What could be going on here?

As we've discussed before, when we try to put ourselves into a parable, we won't necessarily pick the right place.

If we think of the most famous of parables – the Good Samaritan. We would like to think we would do as the Samaritan did, in helping someone who was in a sense his enemy, at cost and risk to himself. But we have to face the possibility that we are one of those who walked by on the other side, not prepared to inconvenience ourselves; too pre-occupied with the importance of our own business, to turn aside and help.

In this parable, as Christians, we will recognise ourselves as the ones who were out on the streets, who have been invited in, having done nothing to earn our place. And we might see ourselves as the servants, sent out to call others in. That's all valid. But given that parables like this are intended to unsettle the comfortable, what happens if we put ourselves in a different place? What if we are the complacent – the ones who think we are in; whose right it now is to sit at the table? That's not a good place to be, but I think it's where Sugirtharajah would say these arrogant British imperialists in India ended up. As soon as we start to feel a sense of entitlement about being the chosen people of God, we are in trouble. As soon as we think we are in and others can't be, we are in trouble.

Perhaps the picture of the king in the parable is the despotic, vengeful god that the entitled think he is – who will keep them safe, while destroying everyone who hasn't got in.

There is a very different way of looking at this parable. I realise I am in danger of falling into my own trap of imposing an interpretation on the parable, so I am not claiming that this is necessarily what it means, or that it was in Matthew's mind when he recorded it. But I think it is a legitimate way to look at it, given what we now know of God and his ways, as revealed to us by Jesus Christ. This is not an original idea, but one picked up by a few commentators. The American theologian, Debie Thomas, often takes a sideways and provocative view of scripture. She has just published an article about this parable called "The God who isn't". She upends the traditional interpretations and their misuse to justify tyranny. And she asks, what if God in this story is not the angry king, but the guest who is in the wrong clothes, who doesn't conform to the king's tyrannical ways, and gets thrown out of the party.

And we can ask ourselves this. Who was it, in that week in Jerusalem, who was singled out by the authorities? Who was it who was silent before his accusers? Who was it who was bound, and whipped and spat upon? Who was it who was taken from the Temple, and the courts of the powerful, out of the city to the place of the skull? Who was it who died as darkness covered the land? It was Jesus, who took our place on the outside. We, who should have been thrown out, have been allowed to stay. In place of our soiled clothes, which could never be acceptable in heaven, we have been clothed in pure robes from the Son. When the Father looks on us, he sees, not our grubby, sinful selves, but us 'clothed in righteousness divine', as Charles Wesley put it.

Our calling is to go with the rejected guest, out amongst the people he values, to show his love, and acceptance, and forgiveness, and hope. To meet the people on the highways and by-ways of life who are called, like us, to come to the table of the real King, our Lord and Father, God revealed in Jesus.

This next song expresses what should be our reaction when we realise what God has done for us in Jesus, in transforming us into the likeness of his Son. It is performed by members of the Aberfeldy Praise Band.

**"King of kings, majesty"** (Aberfeldy Praise Band)

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Let us pray now to the King of kings, who has also revealed himself to us as our loving Father, who longs to hear our prayers.

We thank you that Jesus has called us sinners to come to your throne; that in Jesus we have been adopted into your family; that we have been reclothed in royal robes we don't deserve. In response, we can only bow before you, and give our lives in service to you and the people of this world.

We know we can bring to you the things that are heavy on our minds, about ourselves and others.

Father, we worry about what is happening with the Covid pandemic, as cases surge again, and further restrictions are put on our lives. We are concerned about the worsening situation in our own country; the increased threat to lives, to physical and mental health, to businesses, to our way of life. Out of our own worry, we turn our thoughts towards those who have more to fear: people living in countries which do not have the medical services and the economic strength of our own nation; where hunger and lack of shelter are even more immediate threats than the virus. We pray for those striving to cope and to bring help in these most challenging of circumstances.

Father, we grieve for loved ones who are no longer with us. Out of our own grief we pray for those whose loss is most recent and raw; where grieving itself has been made more difficult by the current restrictions; where relations and friends have not been able to gather round and hug and comfort.

Father, we are sad as we think of the things that have not happened because of the virus – the time with family and friends; the trips away; the holidays; the social events. Out of our own sadness we pray for those who have been worst affected – who have not been able to visit loved ones in hospital or care home; who have lost their jobs, or at least are facing considerable uncertainty for the future; who themselves have suffered illness which has not been shaken off.

We bring these prayers for others and ourselves, seeking to join our thoughts to your thoughts which are full of compassion for those who are struggling.

We can pray together now in the words Jesus taught us:

*Our Father, who art in heaven; hallowed be thy name.*

*Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread.*

*And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*

*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

*For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,*

*for ever. Amen*

Our final hymn is:

**"Now through the grace of God we claim this life to be his own" (CH4 637)**

It is sung in this recording by the St Magnus Festival Chorus, conducted by Glynis Hughes, with Jean Leonard on the piano. The tune, Stracathro, was written by another Glasgow merchant, Charles Hutchison. The words are by Michael Perry, a Church of England vicar in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They speak of how through baptism we are claimed into the life of Christ – in effect, clothed by his royal robes, made sons and daughters of the king.

**Benediction**

This day, and every day, may you have the assurance that you are invited to the banquet of the Lord, that there is a place at the table for you; that you will have the right outfit, because Jesus himself has clothed you with the robes you don't deserve, but which in his love he has provided for you.

And the blessing of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – be with each of you, this day and for ever. A