

Worship for 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time (complete text. A video version is also online)

Keep safe. Keep caring. Keep praying.

Welcome to our South Warwickshire Circuit Sunday service on the 11th October.
 Whoever and wherever you are, and whenever you are sharing: All are welcome!
 The hymns for today's service have been chosen by Richard Wilde; Audrey Simpson and Jeongsook Kim (that's me) lead our prayers; Iain Ballard and Linda Coleman read the Bible and Sam McBratney speaks to us. And Kate Tennyson and Tim Pearson put it all together. Thank you all.
 If you would like to take part, then please get in touch with Kate Tennyson on swc.katetennyson@gmail.com.

THE PREPARATION

Call to worship

The fire is lit.
 The table is set.
 The door is open.
 Here is your invitation to come and share at God's banquet.
 Come, and let your body, mind and soul feast on his love.

Hymn: StF 65 – Sing of the Lord's goodness

**1. Sing of the Lord's goodness, Father of all wisdom,
 come to him and bless his name.
 Mercy he has shown us, his love is for ever,
 faithful to the end of days.**

*Come then, all you nations,
 sing of your Lord's goodness,
 melodies of praise and thanks to God.
 Ring out the Lord's glory,
 praise him with your music,
 worship him and bless his name.*

- 2. Power he has wielded, honour is his garment,
 risen from the snares of death.
 His word he has spoken, one bread he has broken,
 new life he now gives to all.**

*Come then, all you nations,
 sing of your Lord's goodness,
 melodies of praise and thanks to God.
 Ring out the Lord's glory,
 praise him with your music,
 worship him and bless his name.*

- 3. Courage in our darkness, comfort in our sorrow,
 Spirit of our God most high;
 solace for the weary, pardon for the sinner,
 splendour of the loving God.**

*Come then, all you nations,
 sing of your Lord's goodness,
 melodies of praise and thanks to God.
 Ring out the Lord's glory,
 praise him with your music,
 worship him and bless his name.*

- 4. Praise him with you singing, praise him with the trumpet,
 praise him with the lute and harp;
 praise him with the cymbals, praise him with your dancing,
 praise God till the end of days.**

*Come then, all you nations,
 sing of your Lord's goodness,
 melodies of praise and thanks to God.
 Ring out the Lord's glory,
 praise him with your music,
 worship him and bless his name.*

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Prayer of approach

Lord, 'joy is the serious business of heaven',
so as we worship,
help us to rejoice in your presence and taste of
that joy.
Remind us of your goodness to those you have
called.
We are redeemed by your grace,
have a share in your kingdom,
and are invited to feast at the banquet with you.
Amen.

Prayer of confession

Loving God,
so often we come to your table grudgingly,
dragging our feet reluctantly,
and refusing to join the celebration.

Loving God,
so often you must be disappointed
when we refuse the invitation,
fail to rise to the occasion,
and turn up in the wrong frame of mind.

Loving God,
you invite all without prejudice,
lay the feast before us
but leave the response to us.

Everlasting God, who is the feast of life:
we are sorry when we let you down,
when our priorities do not reflect yours
or we miss the moment in the business of life.

Everlasting God, who is the feast of life:
help us to come joyously
to celebrate in the midst of life,
not forgetting our concerns
but sharing them with one another.

Everlasting God, who is the feast of life:
help us to enjoy the feast,
and to spread your invitation far and wide,
so we in turn may generously host your feast of
life.

Amen.

Declaration of forgiveness

God pours blessings upon us, even as we choose
to go our own way.
God is present and seeks to bring healing and
wholeness to all.
Therefore, I invite you to confess all that would
separate you from God or one another.

*(Time for personal reflection and confession in
silence)*

In your mercy,
**Forgive what we have been,
help us to amend what we are,
and direct what we shall be;
that we may delight in your will
and walk in your ways;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

If we confess our sins,
God is faithful and just
and will forgive our sins,
and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
Amen. Thanks be to God.

Hymn: StF 495 – Dear Lord and Father of all born

- 1. Dear Lord and Father of all born
forgive our foolish ways;
reclothe us in our rightful mind;
in purer lives thy service find,
in deeper reverence, praise.**
- 2. In simple trust like theirs who heard
beside the Syrian sea
the gracious calling of the Lord,
let us, like them, without a word
rise up and follow thee.**
- 3. O Sabbath rest by Galilee!
O calm of hills above,
where Jesus knelt to share with thee
the silence of eternity,
interpreted by love!**
- 4. With that deep hush subduing all
our words and works that drown**

**the tender whisper of thy call,
as noiseless let thy blessing fall
as fell thy manna down.**

- 5. Drop thy still dews of quietness,
till all our strivings cease;
take from our souls the strain and stress,
and let our ordered lives confess
the beauty of thy peace.**
- 6. Breathe through the heats of our desire
thy coolness and thy balm;
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
speak through the earthquake, wind and
fire,
O still small voice of calm!**

John Greenleaf Whittier (1807 – 1892)

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

1st Reading Exodus 32:1-14 (NRSVA)

The Golden Calf

¹When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, ‘Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ ²Aaron said to them, ‘Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.’ ³So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴He took the gold from them, formed it in a mould, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’ ⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, ‘Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.’ ⁶They rose early the next day, and offered burnt-offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

⁷The Lord said to Moses, ‘Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”’ ⁹The Lord said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.’

¹¹But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, ‘O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹²Why should the Egyptians say, “It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth”? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, “I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it for ever.”’ ¹⁴And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Epistle Philippians 4:1-9 (NRSVA)

¹Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Exhortations

²I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the

gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Gospel Matthew 22:1-14 (NRSVA)

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet

¹Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ²The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴Again 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.” ⁵But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. ⁷The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸Then he said to his slaves, “The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.” ¹⁰Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both

good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

¹¹But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹²and he said to him, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” And he was speechless. ¹³Then 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.” ¹⁴For many are called, but few are chosen.’

Sermon

The Cost of Discipleship

Many are invited but few are chosen.

Matthew 22:14

A very familiar image, used more than once in the New Testament: the Kingdom of God is like a party. But Matthew’s wedding reception doesn’t make for very easy reading: violence, murder, revenge, rejection, outer darkness. Things designed to ruin the atmosphere! Passages like these disturb our sense of what it means to be Christian. They paint a picture of faith or of God that makes us uncomfortable. Perhaps for that reason, we ought to take them more seriously than we do.

But let’s remind ourselves why we read Scripture, first of all. John Wesley, in the *Preface from his 44 Sermons*, described how he studies the Bible thus:

I sit down alone: Only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book; for this end, to find the way to heaven. Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights: — “Lord, is it not thy word, ‘If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God?’

Later he wrote:

[I]t is a stated rule in interpreting Scripture never to depart from the plain, literal sense, unless it implies an absurdity ("Of the Church," ¶I.12)

We search the Scriptures, according to Wesley, 'to find the way to heaven'. It is not a history book, nor a rule book, a constitution, or a liturgical text, still less an idol to be worshipped; it is, above all, a map and guide for pilgrims. Its value is that, through its words, God reveals to us how to become better disciples of Jesus Christ. The knowledge we glean, then, is essentially practical and transformative - we know how we should live.

What then, are we to learn from this parable? What does it teach us about the rejection of the gospel, about violence, and about discipleship?

REJECTING THE GOSPEL

So, according to Wesley, a good place to start is the 'plain, literal sense'. In the case of this text, it has been seen as a parable that illustrates the rejection of the Jewish community to the ministry of Jesus. Jesus wasn't just rejected, but violently disposed of: the messenger was beaten and killed. The community who first heard these words in Matthew's Gospel were Jews who had accepted Jesus and suffered as a result. They needed the kind of reassurance to reinforce the choice they had made to accept the Messiahship of Jesus. This passage, in part, proclaims a message that the Gospel is open to all.

As those who read this story in the light of 2000 years of Christian anti-Judaism and anti-Semitic violence, we cannot separate texts from how they have been used. We need to acknowledge that passages like this have been used to justify revenge and violence up to and including the Nazi Holocaust.

It's worth reflecting too: in this parable, if the original guests had come, would the invitation have been extended to anyone else? Is there

something in the rejection that led to the blessing of the nations?

Rejection of the Gospel takes other forms today. In Britain, we have got used to indifference, mockery and sometimes hostility from a community that has long learnt how to get along without God. Some in the Church want to turn this into a culture war and come out fighting. How does this parable help us cope with that kind of rejection?

Let's acknowledge that rejection hurts and it destabilizes our own faith. Like Matthew's community we have made a choice, but it worries us when people don't agree with that choice. Some of us may remember a time when, or come from a place where it was 'normal' to go to church or Sunday School; now, it is a minority occupation. It leads us to question the idea that it is really good news and that fear and uncertainty may provoke a defensive response. We may even respond in anger to any perceived threat to our fragile belief. We need to hear, especially in a time like this, that the truthfulness of a message is not proportional to its popularity.

VIOLENCE

The first messengers are sent out to deliver some pretty good news and ended up dead! The invitation to the banquet is met with a murderous response. And the king's rage is vented in extreme violence and destruction. The happy story of a wedding for a favoured son ends in a blood bath.

Are we comfortable with a violent God who enacts revenge? It is right to equate God with the king in this story, someone given to acts of such violence? We have seen how texts like this have been appropriated by anti-Semites, Crusaders, fascists and White supremacists to visit horrendous violence and abuse on Jews, Muslims, black people, women, LGBTQ+ folk. In Wesley's words, can this interpretation lead us

to heaven? Is this interpretation leading to absurdity?

I want to say, 'yes', it is, and should be rejected. The overwhelming picture of God we get through the life and ministry of Jesus is one of non-violence, anti-violence. When put alongside the rest of the parables that Jesus told, the violence of this story is particularly harsh. There is definitely a message here about cycles of violence: the murder of the messengers leads to the violent response. Those who live by the sword

But it may also speak deeply to the experience of the first readers of this parable, Jewish Christians who knew all too well the violence of rejection. As with many of the psalms, the expression of feelings of violent revenge may meet a pastoral need rather than point to a violent God.

Christianity and violence have been all-too-comfortable bedfellows for most of the last two millennia. Too many have suffered (and continue to suffer) at the hands of those who claim to follow Christ. The physical violence of previous eras has been replaced with the kind of emotional and psychological abuse that may inflict more damage in the long run. Institutional policies and practices that continue to exclude women, people of colour, LGBTQ+ people, the disabled, do violence that is hidden but deeply wounding.

Is part of the message of this parable: it shall NOT be so among you!?

EXCLUSION

One of the most difficult parts of this parable is the removal of the wedding guest without the right clothing. It seems to go against everything we want the Church to be – a place of welcome whatever you're wearing. If it is a metaphor for the final judgement, what is it saying about the requirements for entry to the Kingdom?

The main message of this story is one that warns against judgmentalism or complacency on the part of the Christian community. It points to a discipleship that is active, being prepared (properly dressed) for heaven, whilst giving few clues about what that looks like. We need to look elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel for descriptions of 'authentic discipleship', especially chapter 25, when the sheep and the goats are separated, the ten bridesmaids are called to be ready and the master returns to see how the talents have been used. Interesting that the focus is not on belief itself – the goats know Jesus too – but in how faith has been put into practice.

Authentic discipleship is not a badge we wear but the life we lead.

CONCLUSION

But the plain meaning remains – that the Gospel is active, has a practical content in which faith is lived out. We are not simply called to believe in Jesus, but to live for Jesus; not to be Christian, but to become Christlike. And we do so, not for fear of being thrown into outer darkness, but because we have been loved into life, overwhelmed by generosity and filled with a transforming spirit. We have been invited and chosen, chosen to bear fruit, fruit that will last.

Amen.

Affirmation of Faith

Let us affirm our faith in Jesus Christ:

**Though he was divine,
he did not cling to equality with God,
but made himself nothing.
Taking the form of a slave,
he was born in human likeness.
He humbled himself
and was obedient to death,
even the death of the cross.
Therefore God has raised him on high,
and given him the name above every name:**

that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bow and
every voice proclaim that
Jesus Christ is Lord
to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

THE RESPONSE

Prayers of thanksgiving

For eternal hope that comes from you, almighty God,

we give you thanks and praise.

For your gentleness and compassion...

For your peace within...

For your light in the darkness...

For hope when all seems hopeless...

For love beyond measure...

we give you thanks and praise.

Amen.

Hymn: StF 35 – The trumpets sound the angels sing

1. **The trumpets sound, the angels sing,
the feast is ready to begin;
the gates of heaven are open wide,
and Jesus welcomes you inside.**

*Sing with thankfulness songs of pure delight,
come and revel in heaven's love and light;
take your place at the table of the King,
the feast is ready to begin,
the feast is ready to begin.*

2. **Tables are laden with good things,
O taste the peace and joy he brings;
he'll fill you up with love divine,
he'll turn your water into wine.**

*Sing with thankfulness songs of pure delight,
come and revel in heaven's love and light;
take your place at the table of the King,
the feast is ready to begin,
the feast is ready to begin.*

3. **The hungry heart he satisfies,
offers the poor his paradise;
now hear all heaven and earth applaud
the amazing goodness of the Lord.**

*Sing with thankfulness songs of pure delight,
come and revel in heaven's love and light;
take your place at the table of the King,
the feast is ready to begin,
the feast is ready to begin.*

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Prayers of intercession

O God, we come to pray not only for ourselves, but for each other – for those we know and those we don't, for situations we understand and for those that confound us.

The news tells us of trauma and heartache across the world.

Bless, O Lord, all who hurt and all those involved in the healing.

We hear of death and dying, of grieving and weeping...

We hear of pain, scarring and disfigurement...

We hear of anguish and confusion...

We hear of those in need of help, and those who struggle to find it...

We hear of the lost and the alone...

And we know, Lord, there are myriad others known only to you.

Bless them all in their hurting and their healing in Jesus name. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

We say the Lord's prayer:

**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 trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the
glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.**

The Offering & prayer

We remember before God the financial gift we have given this week to our church and our intentions to serve God and our neighbours this week.

Let us pray.

Loving God, take, bless and use the gifts we bring before you today to the glory of our Lord Jesus.
Amen.

THE DISMISSAL

Hymn: StF 692 – Your hand O God has guided

- 1. Your hand, O God, has guided
your flock, from age to age;
the wondrous tale is written,
full clear, on every page;
our forebears owned your goodness,
and we their deeds record;
and both of this bear witness:
one Church, one faith, one Lord.**
- 2. Your heralds brought glad tidings
to greatest, as to least;
they summoned all to hasten
and share the great King's feast;
their gospel of redemption,
sin pardoned, right restored,
was all in this enfolded:
one Church, one faith, one Lord.**
- 3. Your mercy will not fail us,
nor leave your work undone;
with your right hand to help us,
the victory shall be won;**

**and then, by all creation,
your name shall be adored,
and this shall be our anthem:
one Church, one faith, one Lord.**

Edwards Hayes Plumptre (1821-1891)

Prayer & blessing

We go our separate ways, Lord – some with smiles or some with frowns; with our hopes and with fears; with answers but also questions; some with heavy hearts; or with anxieties, others with relief. We go our separate ways, Lord, but we never go alone. With thankful hearts, we share the journey of life with each other and with you. You God are with us as we go. **Amen.**

And the blessing of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be with you now and ever more. **Amen**

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