

9th October 2011. Trinity 16. Philippians 4:1-9. Matthew 22:1-14.

You know, I believe that our Lord would usually have had a smile on His face as He told these wonderful spiritual stories, which we call parables. How about His description of that man with a plank in his eye trying to remove the speck in his neighbour's eye? Or His description of a camel trying to pass through the eye of a needle? Surely, these ideas will have been said with a chuckle. Christianity, real Christianity is a joyous thing! How lucky we are to know Christ and His saving love and His grace for us! We of all people are to be envied for our faith, which is more precious than gold - more wondrous than anything that has ever been known! And so, I want you to keep in mind that all that Jesus taught, He did so with joy and with love and with celebration. Po-faced, miserable Christians are no advert for the joyous faith which is in us.

And so, this morning, we have yet another of His parables. This one written by the writer of Matthew's gospel has conveyed Jesus' teaching in a rather severe way. For I'm sure that Christ never meant it to be severe but to be a warm-hearted and gentle warning to the Jewish Church of His day. This story is told in both the gospels of Luke and Matthew, but in each case in a slightly different way. Some commentators have pointed out that mixed in with Matthew's version we heard this morning, there is quite possibly part of another parable since the mention of the seizing, ill-treatment and killing of the King's servants doesn't seem to fit with the main point of the parable and, since a wedding feast would hardly be disrupted by the sending of an army to destroy a city.

There are basically two interpretations of this parable. The first, which applied to those of Jesus' own times concerned the Pharisees and the Jewish hierarchy of His day, those who led and taught and ministered to the Jewish nation. Jesus directly challenged them through this story. The parable is about the Kingdom of God. The story as it is told is of a King who prepares a wedding feast for His Son. When the wealthy of Jesus' day prepared a banquet of any kind or a wedding feast, it was usual to send out formal invitations. The invitation would have indicated the date on which the banquet was to be held. But no specific time would normally be given, since the preparations for a great feast would be quite laborious and extensive and, as a courtesy to the more honoured guests and to save them having to wait around, they would only be notified when everything had been fully prepared. As the story indicated, these honoured guests

paid no attention to the servants when they came to notify them that all was ready. They just carried on with everyday life, one went off to his farm and another to carry on with his business. This of course was a grave discourtesy to the King who then sent His servants out into the streets to invite anyone and everyone to attend the banquet. The implication of this of course is very clear. In the parable, the King, by implication represents the God of Israel, the One Who has chosen and entered into a covenant with His people, the Jews, the tribe of Israel. The invitation is to the Kingdom of God. The wedding is of His Son, Jesus and the Bride as so often figured, especially in the Book of Revelation, is the Church. The invitation is to share in all the benefits, the love, the forgiveness and the joy of God's Kingdom. These are not to be lightly dismissed. For God offers His invitation with few strings. The Old Covenant is now to be superseded by this New Covenant, a covenant of the love and free grace and generosity of God. The parable does not make it clear why the invitees turned their back on the banquet, only that they do and that they appear to be more interested in their farms and in their business. The alternative invitation to all and sundry, is the pointed one that if the Jewish nation will quite simply not accept this New Covenant, this new and open invitation to God's Kingdom, then others will take their place, anyone prepared to respond especially including the Gentiles, the non-Jews. So quite simply this is the challenge of this parable, to the Jews of Jesus' day. They are the honoured guests, they have been specially invited, but they have turned God's invitation down and the privileges of God's Kingdom will now be given to others.

This then is the obvious and immediate interpretation of this parable. The second interpretation of this parable might be directly applied to our situation today. The King's banquet is God's banquet, His wedding feast is for His Son Jesus and His Bride, the Church, as she is directly referred to in the Book of Revelation. The Church, the people of God, the people of the New and everlasting covenant are invited to God's banquet. It is the heavenly banquet which one day will be celebrated by all believers in heaven. That heavenly banquet is foreshadowed here on earth each week, not only here in St.Mark's, but in churches throughout the world, as Christians join in the celebration of the Eucharist, the Holy Communion. Of course, all are invited, but sadly as we see today, not everyone responds to the invitation. If they did, then St.Mark's would be absolutely delighted. St.Mark's would also be absolutely overwhelmed. The 100 or so chairs, which we have just bought and installed in this church would probably have to be supplemented by another 16 or 17

thousand! And, if we did where would we put them? I'm sure that that's a logistical problem that our Vicar Jeanette and our Church-wardens would just love to have! We are of course still in the season of Harvest, and whilst we always take time out to thank God for all that He so faithfully and generously provides for us to sustain us and for our enjoyment, we must never forget the deeper and more spiritual harvest that we, His church here on earth are responsible for - the harvest of human souls. In this respect, little has changed since I became a member of this church back in 1968. It was the sacred obligation and objective of St.Mark's then. And, this is still our corporate goal today, to reach out to all with an invitation to God's Heavenly banquet which we faithfully foreshadow here at St.Mark's week by week, month by month and year by year.

Quite recently, a copy of *The Moving Church News* published at harvest-time in October 1968 came into my hands. Our incumbent then, the Rev.Denys Crouch, says this in his monthly magazine letter for harvest, and I quote, "The attractive cover of this month's magazine may remind us of the thankfulness which is due to God for His liberality in providing the means and skill for man to produce food; enough to supply sufficient for everybody in the world. Yet whilst none of us has ever known what it feels like to be really hungry, half of humanity has never known what it feels like *not* to be hungry. To go to Harvest Festival and sing, "We plough the fields and scatter the good seed on the land" is in a sense an anachronism today. If we are to avoid mawkish sentimentality over this Festival, and the consequent charge of hypocrisy by those who stand outside the Church, we must be realistic and objective about its significance in the world of today. It should be, I suggest, an occasion for penitence, as well as thanksgiving." He then goes on in his letter, "Response to the invitation I made last month, for those who need transport in order to get to church on Sundays and for those who can offer a lift to contact me - just one offer! Since I came here I have been scotching, one by one, the excuses offered by parishioners for their non-attendance at church except for when they want to be married or have their baby "done". He goes on to extrapolate these excuses. "11a.m. Service leaves insufficient time to get back home and prepare the lunch for one o'clock." Time altered to 10a.m. "Can't understand the services". Repeated offers to explain them. "Can't get anyone to baby-sit for us on Sundays". A creche provided at the Vicarage. "I prefer Matins to Holy Communion". Why? "Don't know". Anyway, I replaced the Sung Eucharist with Matins on one occasion and advertised it widely. Congregation - six! "We can't climb the hill to get to church." Evidently, the hill becomes

steeper on Sundays than it is on weekdays, for shopping, changing library books, and hair-dos. However, I tried to get a car service organised. Applications - none!" He goes on, "Personally, I feel highly insulted that people take me for such a simpleton that I can't see through their weak excuses and pie-crust promises, and for those concerned deeply sorry that they can't be honest, even with themselves. I have not the slightest doubt God prefers an honest agnostic, even an atheist, to a non-participating professing Christian. As I have said on countless occasions, if there is anything you don't understand or don't like about any aspect of worship at St. Mark's - or about me - come and talk it over with me. Don't sniff in disdain, stay away, or talk about it behind my back. That's not Christian! And don't say it's *my* place to come and ask *you* whether there's anything troubling you. Be reasonable, there are 6,000 of you, and only one Vicar!" Denys was not one to mince words!

Now all of this may bring a wry and knowing smile to your lips, especially for our Vicar Jeanette, as it does seem doesn't it, that very little has changed over the years? Yes, we do now have bus services into and out of the valley. And the population of Biggin Hill is now about three times that of 1968. The message of our gospel this morning, is a gentle rebuke to those many professing Christians in this town of Biggin Hill today, who neither support this church with their presence or indeed with their monetary presents! And yet, still expect this church and our Vicar to always be here to provide services for the baptisms of their little ones, for the marriage of their sons and daughters and for the funerals of their deceased loved ones. Of course, this is not necessarily a rebuke to us and to those who are committed. As our gospel says, "Many are called but few are chosen." We are the servants of the King, as described in the parable, whose task it is to go out and invite all and sundry to the feast. Our church of St. Mark's is the established Church of England in this place and therefore we have the privilege and responsibility of providing baptisms, marriages and funerals as well as spiritual support, sometimes called the "cure of souls" for all who come to us seeking help. And yes there *is* a rebuke to those in the parable, who we are told, attended the banquet but were not wearing wedding gowns. Could these people be those so-called professing Christians who are what we would call the users and takers but non-givers. We might call them pseudo-Christians who have no commitment to Christ or to His Church, whose faith is merely a pretence. And so, the challenge for us remains the same. How to reach out to these people, especially to those young families and young people, precious people, precious in the sight of God, who stand outside our church

fellowship today, but who could become the church of tomorrow. The greatest enemy of the Christian faith today is the evil of indifference. We must keep on praying for our outreach as a church, for more effective ways to reach out and especially for our Mission and Outreach Committee here at St.Mark's, as we seek God's guidance to fulfil this sacred task of reaping the harvest of souls for His Kingdom in this place. Amen.