

Pentecost 19: 11th October 2020

Matthew 22:1-14

Contemplatio: Michael Wood

Last week we heard the parable of the vineyard. Wendy was drawing our attention to the fact that the tenants are ONLY tenants – not owners. Wendy made connections with the fact that we are not **owners** of our planet, only stewards. Jesus proclaims judgement on us when we presume to own the earth and exploit it for personal gain. We cannot avoid the truth of the laws of physics and biology. Joe Biden, in a speech his week tried to persuade the American people that wearing a facemask was not a party political statement, but was appeal from scientific truth.

The parable today continues this theme of judgement, and particularly the abuse and misuse of power. It's a challenging parable because it can be read in more than one way. Today I am going to cover *two* ways this parable can be read depending on what hermeneutical lens (which means 'principles of interpretation') that we bring.

This is going to jump into the nitty gritty, so I apologise if the detail is TOO much but I'll try to summarise the big picture idea at the end.

I'm going to break the reading into two parts and then look at each part in a couple of different ways. This will be much easier if I share the text on the screen so I hope you can read it.

Section 1: READING AS 'LIKENESS' (probably the most common way this parable has been read)

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be *compared to* [is 'like'] a king [by analogy = God] who gave a wedding banquet [lot's of images of divine banquets in the Hebrew Scriptures as a sign of the 'end times'] for his son. [Jesus]. This treats the parable as an *analogy*

He sent his slaves [prophets] to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come [arrogance – huge insult to divine majesty]. Again 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.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them [cf later talking to Scribes and Pharisees, 'I send you prophets, sages and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify and some you will flog in your synagogues 23.34] The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city [probably destruction of Jerusalem/Temple by Romans in 70AD].

Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet. Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; [this is a sign of God's generosity – inviting not just the good but the bad also] so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

This way of reading the passage raises some awkward questions:

Does the parable reflect Jesus's thought, or Matthew's interpretation of Jesus's thought? Matthew has a stylistic tendency which shows up as a fondness for God (apparently) throwing people into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. It's

worth remembering that Matthew is a Jew addressing a primarily Jewish community and he is experiencing major frustration with his own community and perhaps ratchets up middle eastern rhetoric accordingly? Matthew was most likely writing AFTER the destruction of Jerusalem, so is he most likely interpreting the destruction of Jerusalem through the lenses of the conquest of Jerusalem several centuries earlier by the Babylonians. The interpretation of that previous historic event, in a nutshell, was "idolatry leads to destruction of the city as God's judgement". The question for us though, in light of Christ, is whether this puts up quite a different image of God than the one we see in Jesus. If the hermeneutical (interpretive lens) we apply STARTS from a prior story in the Hebrew Scriptures – that God uses foreign armies to ruthlessly kill men, women and children to make a corrective point – to bring us down a notch so that our hearts will return to God, then that will clearly lead us to read this parable as a repeat warning.

But what if we started with a hermeneutical principle, based on the life, death and resurrection of Christ, that 'God is like Jesus', then we could interpret the parable differently.

For example, Daniel Berrigan, an American Jesuit, said that we ought NOT to read this parable as an analogy for God, but as a CONTRAST between God and the violent kings of this world. Let see what happens if we lead it this way.

Section 1: READING AS CONTRAST

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to **[is NOT 'like']** a king **[the violent tyrant – kings of this world, like the house of Herod]** who gave a wedding banquet **[Kings loved ingratiating themselves to others by throwing on lavish banquets – in fact, John the Baptism got beheaded as just such a banquet]** for his son. **[Jesus]**.

He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come **[arrogance – huge loss of face to a king]**. Again 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.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them **[not only loss of face but now looking more like an insurrection...possibly activity of zealots]**. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city **[again – not unknown behaviour by tyrant monarchs]**.

Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet. Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; **[old fashioned branch-stacking; pads out the numbers; makes the king look good. After all, who is going to refuse an invitation now they know what the king will do if they refuse the invitation. He might burn down their village. The king's behaviour is psychopathic where desire for public applause will even make a leader destroy his own population – remind us of anyone in the world right now?]** so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

Question:

So what do you think? Is this way of reading the parable a possibility? This way of reading starts with the hermeneutical principle that our image of God should start with Jesus and that the Hebrew Scriptures need to be re-read in light of Jesus. In other words, the scriptures need to be read 'backwards'.

This might become a bit clearer as we look at the second part of the parable, which we'll look at firstly as an ANALOGY and then as CONTRAST

Section 2: READING AS LIKENESS

But when the king [GOD] came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' [wedding robe as symbol of being ready to party – to fully engage with the king's project of inclusion of everyone – both good and bad. This man sounds a bit like the older son in the parable of prodigal son – sitting outside moping about the Father's generosity. We could also draw on Paul's image in Galatians of the convert being 'clothed in Christ' Gal. 3:27 and this guy is not yet 'clothed'] And he was speechless. Then 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.' For many are called, but few are chosen." [If you're going to be miserable, go and be miserable outside along with everyone else who can't cope with my generosity and come back when you want to party. To live in such a hard-hearted way does, in fact, feel like being 'bound']

Awkward questions

Reading the parable this way (as it's often read, has a kind of internal logic to it. And again, we seem to have an image of God who is rather hard edged compared, for example, to the Father of the two sons. This God seems to be a God who welcomes IN but with conditions. If we don't meet his expectations in the party, then we can expect to be turfed out.

So let's turn again to how the passage reads if the King is not an *analogy* for God but is a *contrast* with God.

Section 2: as contrast with worldly power

But when the king [tyrant king] came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless [the guest is Christ and Christ is refusing to participate in the king's self-serving violence and pscyo-pathology. Refusing to wear the robe is an act of nonviolent resistance, as is Christ's silence before Pilate (27:14). The only wedding robe Christ will wear is one washed white in blood (Revelation 3:5, 7:13, 12:11) Then 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.' For many are called, but few are chosen." [Christ is bound hand and foot on a cross and crucified outside the city where there is much weeping and gnashing of teeth].

Conclusions?

Which of these two readings resonate most with us? On balance I lean more towards the second reading of the parable.

This second approach draws our attention not to the king but to the man who is cast out....an image of Christ who only reigns by subjecting himself to our violence rather than enacting violence – even apparently righteous violence.

When it comes to assessing how to read a challenging piece of scripture, particularly where any kind of violence is involved, is to be asking, 'where is Christ in this story?' or 'Who is Christ in this story'.

The Christian gospel is that Christ defeats sin and violence not by using violence against others, but by transforming violence through his death and resurrection.

Jesus completely reworks our notions of kingship. We can no longer see God as like brutal earthly kings who use military power to get what they want. God is not a socio path who fills banquet halls with his cronies in fear of their lives.

The Banquet to which Jesus invites us is more like a feast for 4000 or 5000 people sitting in fields, nourished by a few loaves and fish, or perhaps a loaf and a little drop of red wine, announcing forgiveness and mercy and inviting us to do the same.