

## Sermon 11.10.20

As a teacher I am sure I not alone with others of this profession who would say that occasionally there are times when you are dreading a lesson. It is not necessarily because of the students or even the subject overall. Sometimes it is just that particular week – that particular part of the subject. You can look at the lesson plan beforehand and just get the feeling that this is not going to be easy. Now you can get pleasantly surprised on those occasions, but almost always because you had to put the work in – and encourage others to do the same. These are not lessons where you can wing it – not that I would ever do such a thing!

I have to confess that when I looked at this week's Gospel I got a similar sense of dread. The Parable of the Wedding Banquet begins well enough. It is not a surprise that the King would be angry at the response he gets from his guests who are invited to his son's wedding and who refuse to come, in addition treating the King's slaves appallingly. Although the extent of his revenge could be seen as harsh. However, it gets a little more tricky as you come to the end when the King approaches the guest who does not have a wedding robe on. Questioning this is one thing. Ordering the guys hands and feet to be tied together and for him to be chucked out into the darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth is quite another. This seems very harsh for someone who made an inappropriate fashion statement.

So, I found myself potentially wanting to do that thing that is all too easy for a preacher. The thing that isn't open to a teacher. Because as preachers we don't have to follow a lesson plan and, even though there is a Lectionary, we can essentially choose what reading we're going to preach on. So it was almost a case of, "I know, I'll just talk about the Paul reading. That's nice. It talks about being Christ-like and loving each other. People will want to hear about that. I'll just ignore the difficult Gospel. No-one wants to hear about teeth gnashing really."

Unfortunately – or fortunately perhaps – my conscience didn't let me do that. A little voice in my head said that wasn't the way to go. But it also did suggest that may looking at these two readings together would be helpful in informing us about how to respond to them.

So first I looked at Paul. What does this reading tell us? For me, one of things I really enjoy about a lot of Paul's writing is the poetic nature of it. One of my favourite reading is from Romans 8 – the famous verses 38 -39; "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." If we look at the end of our reading from Philippians today, there is a similar rhythm; "Finally beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep 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." When Paul writes like this, there seems to me to be an emphasis placed on the closeness of Christ, about the grace that connects us to him, and about how we cultivate this and learn from it. Love always seems to be at the heart of this poetry. In our reading from Philippians Paul is instructing his readers about how to aspire to be Christ-like; what our focus of attention needs to be.

Of course, in amongst all of these qualities, a key thing to remember is that Jesus was not only fully divine, but also fully human. One of the reasons we can aspire to be Christ-like – even if we never quite get there (and getting there is not the point anyway) – is that God came down to earth to be among us, and therefore he shows us not only the best way to be, but also the human way to be. Some of the most helpful, inspiring actions of Jesus are those where he is not performing miracles, but where he shows his vulnerability. The moment where he sees his friend Lazarus dead and we hear those two beautiful words, "Jesus wept". The time when his rage was so great that he turned the tables in the temple. And strikingly the night in the Garden of Gethsemane where he questioned his own ability to go through with his destiny, when he desperately needed his father's strength to be able to follow through with what he knew he had to do. On a side note, if you have never seen Jesus Christ Superstar, I highly recommend that at the very least you listen to the song Gethsemane from that musical. It is a fabulous representation of the human qualities of Jesus – the despair, the rage, the confusion, the determination, the grace. All of these things we can also access as human beings, but we need God beside us as well, just as Jesus did.

So, in case you thought I was talking so much about Paul in order to avoid Matthew's Gospel, let us return to the parable of the Wedding Banquet. As I said earlier, the beginning might be what you would expect. An emphasis on those who feel privileged and entitled, and therefore take their invitation for granted and do not behave in any gracious or kind way. I am sure that we can think of people we have experienced in our lives who seem to live like this. And, as a metaphor for the Kingdom of God it doesn't present us with any surprises. Behave badly, behave as if you expect your privilege and you will suffer.

So, what happens when we look at the guests who are then invited and who attend the wedding. What is this about? What is the guest with no coat telling us? For a start, no-one else at the wedding notices that he does not have a wedding coat on. This is only observed by the King. So, is this an indication that sometimes, it is difficult for us to discern the motives of others around us? Is this giving us an insight into what it means to attend the banquet that we have been invited to? We cannot go to the party and fake it. God knows what is in our hearts and that is what God sees.

However, I do not want to run the risk of starting to preach about a threatening God – the big bogie man in the sky who is making a list of who is naughty or nice. So, if attending the party is about entering the Kingdom of God and living out our faith, how does this relate to what Paul teaches us in Philippians? Maybe it is the idea that the man without a coat at the wedding party did not think about the things that Paul talks of. Remember that when the guest is questioned by the King he remains silent. This is an important point. He has been caught out and there is no attempt made to correct his behaviour.

Of course, we need to be careful here. This is not about being perfect. That is not what is being asked of us. We know that we are loved by God through the grace of Jesus Christ. And this gives us freedom. It gives us the freedom to acknowledge our whole selves in our glorious imperfections. And it also gives us the freedom to engage in our own agency. To have some ownership over what we do, knowing that it is the thought and actions that we engage in that count – not in achieving perfection.

Going back to the guidance we have for this – the humanity of Jesus – how many of us have experienced these things? And how different can one day be from the next for each of us?

Our Christ-like aspiration could mean that we have a day full of purpose, completing tasks and feeling a sense of accomplishment. Maybe relating more to those times when Jesus is followed and listened to. Or, our Christ-like aspiration may mean that we have a day where even getting out of bed is simply too much and, like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, we pray to God to simply get us through the day. As terrifying or depressing or numb as those days may feel, that does not mean that God is not with us – nor does it mean that we cannot be Christ-like. It is simply another aspect of Christ. And that is the point – that Christ is both divine and human. And no-one is asking human to be divine. Not even God. We can never be exactly as Christ. But what we can do is be open to God's love, receive it and share it with integrity and compassion.

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