

SERMON FOR TRINITY 18 | 11.10.2020

Isaiah 25: 1-9; Philippians 4: 4-9; St Matthew 22: 1-14

After last Sunday's Harvest celebrations with so many of our young people taking part – and before we have a really upbeat series of celebrations: Baptisms and First Communions on St Luke's Day, the delayed Parish AGM and then All Saints' Sunday with Musical Vespers in the evening, today we have a real opportunity to be still, to enjoy the singing of the Second Choir and to reflect on our day to day relationship with God. It's a 'breathe more easily' kind of Sunday – and we all need those!

While I want to focus on today's Gospel may I start with something very familiar: the prayer of St Francis of Assisi? You know it well:

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life. Amen.*

The prayer has been used and misquoted in all kinds of places – not least on the steps of Downing Street – but at its heart it is about one-to-one relationships: it is about the quality of the way we relate to one another, day to day. It recognises that, so often, we just don't give one another the time or the complete attention that those we live and meet deserve. And, very gently, it tries to soothe the stresses and strains that so many endure. Every person matters.

And yet we live in a global environment where it isn't like that. Christopher Lamb, reflecting on a new document *Fratelli tutti*, coming out of Rome, says that what Pope Francis is trying to do is to *repair and enrich relationships across the whole human family*.

Lamb calls the papal document *a kick in the head for the rising tide of barbarism* where lies, inequalities and strident ideologies dominate. How can we live in a kinder world?

So here is the **Gospel story. An outrageous Gospel story actually! It is Jesus at his most provocative, using language that is way beyond the pale!**

It starts with the sending out of invitations to a wedding feast - not part of our present experience but recognisable nonetheless. **But the people receiving the invitations don't want to go. They beat up the first postman and kill his replacement. What does the king do? Shrug his shoulders and work on Plan B? Not at all! He sends his soldiers out, kills those who don't do what he wants and burns down their city! Well, a bit over dramatic maybe but it does teach us to take these parables seriously not literally – not least if it encourages us to draw the conclusion that God is a nasty, vindictive dictator. In the middle of all the mayhem we are invited to see what the story is really all about.**

And the question that emerges might be to ask why the king (God) asked this bunch of people to his feast in the first place? Wouldn't he know that they were likely to turn their noses up at his offer? But the second group – the ones the servants found in the street who were not expecting any kind of invitation: were they any more 'worthy'? He didn't even know them. What kind of story is this?

It's the kind of story that asks us to think about the way we judge one another. We spend our time, our money and our compassion on those we think are 'worthy' of our emotions and our attention. We haven't got infinite resources so we target what we have on those who we think are worth it.

Jesus' story on the other hand, turns all that upside down. First he invites those who just think him a joke; and when that fails he drags in people off the streets. None of them are what you and I might think of as good guests for a wedding party! Yet he spends time and effort – and I suspect a load of money – on these people. Why? None of them deserve it. Not one.

But that is God's kind of generosity; it always was. It doesn't matter to him whether the guests are up to scratch or not: *go and invite everyone you find* he says. And that would mean, all things being equal, that he would have invited us...

But before we return to St Francis' prayer, we need to make one quick observation. What was the difference between the first set of guests and the second? The answer of course is that the second group actually showed up. As the account says, *the wedding hall was full*. The only difference between the two groups is that the late guests turned up to the feast when the others failed to do so.

And that is all God demanded. That they come. That they were present. So let's look at what 'being present' means.

You have, and I certainly have, been part of a conversation when the person you are talking to isn't actually, there! Well they are physically, but you know that although words are being spoken, their mind and their interest is actually somewhere else. It isn't a nice experience but it is part of what Pope Francis says is a brutalising world in which people only relate when they are sure of what they will get out of the conversation.

Being fully present to those we are with is something quite different: it is about making space for them, empathising in a way that allows them to be themselves so that they are allowed to say what they feel and not what we want to hear. It means letting go of our own assumptions and prejudices; it means being vulnerable to their hurts and learning to be patient with the way they express themselves.

And if we are not being truly present with one another then perhaps we are not being entirely present with God either. We've also got farms and businesses to attend to. We're busy and distracted. There are always other things to be doing – better, more valuable things than being with him or her.

But Jesus' parable challenges all that. All he asks of us is that turn up. No we are not worthy of that invitation – but in that willingness to turn up we discover what God thinks of us: he counts us worthy ... and as a result we have a new gift of grace that opens doors and allows change to happen.

That is what Pope Francis' document *Fratelli Tutti* is inviting us to think about. In a world where the biggest and pushiest get all the attention he paraphrases the Assisi prayer like this: where there is extremism and ego-focused politics, let the weak and the poor take central place; where there is an unyielding nationalism that tries to keep out the people we don't want, let our common humanity be our guide; where a selfish individualism is emerging let us work together for justice and peace; where hate crimes and street crime towards are rife, let there be kindness; where there is inequality let there be a determination to share; where politicians abuse of their opponents, let there be dialogue; and where there is the thoughtless pushing of one ideology over another, let there be a genuine attention to faith.

Jesus' parables are always confrontational: they challenge the common way of looking at things and they offer a new direction.

This one invites us to slow down and to give attention to those around us. That is what each of can do. But on the bigger, world stage it is a call to end the determination of too many in power to exploit the genuine fears of many about what the future looks like.

The current political scene is not a pretty one and it takes someone with the international status of the Pope to be heard in the corridors of power – in Washington, Beijing or indeed in Downing Street.

For us the words of St Francis may have a much more modest influence on the world. That doesn't matter. As Mother Teresa once said, *if you can't save a thousand, you can at least save one*. That is the upside down logic of Jesus parable. It is also the spirit of St Francis of Assisi.

Always the way of God is 'by invitation'. *Will you come and share my feast? You may not deserve it but that doesn't matter. Just come. Bring your full attention to the person next to you. Come and be a channel of my peace...*