

SERMON FOR TRINITY 19 2023 | 15.10.23

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

No one can be surprised by the latest figures from Royal Mail. The numbers of letters and cards that are sent through the system has fallen by 60% over the last twenty years and by 30% since the Covid pandemic. As a result the price of a first class stamp has more than doubled since 2012, from 60p to £1.25 from the beginning of this month.

Of course we all know why. It's not that we have stopped wanting to be in touch with each other but we want to do it instantly. Instead of waiting for the postman to call we simply drop people an email or a text. It's quick and its reliable – so long as you have a mobile phone!

But there is still nothing nicer than receiving a nicely printed and properly addressed invitation card. As in our Gospel story, a wedding invitation is still a bit of a special event, perhaps preceded by a 'save the date' note. I still send out Christmas cards and birthdays cards although I guess those too are under threat. How many card shops have closed over the last five years? And these days, if you want to send a card one, you can now get it personalized via the internet at not much more than the regular price in the high street.

'Invitations' do something. They mark us out as special people. Someone, somewhere, wants to include us into their big celebration. And because such things are expensive, we will have survived the 'cut' where names of people who don't matter quite so much are quietly deleted. We are wanted – for ourselves: *we hope 'you' will be there to make our day even more enjoyable...* In a small way we are being 'invested' in and we matter.

Today's Gospel has all those emotions built into it, even if it is in rather grander language with a King being the focus of the story. But what happens when the invitations are sent out is exactly the same: those individually chosen are able to decline the invitation: *I don't want to come, I don't want to be with you or to change my plans; ; I don't care how much trouble you have gone to in preparing this celebration.*

While some might say, this is just a matter of bad manners it is actually far more than that: sending out invitations makes one vulnerable because we know that people have a choice to say yes or no.

And that is why Jesus tells this story. As you would expect he is endlessly trying to tease out with us an answer to our question: what is God like? Quoting Isaiah from 800 years before, Jesus talks about a God who sets us up on a mountain of rich food, with rich marrows and fine wines on the menu, a place where hunger and deprivation have been swept away. After all the hunger pangs our tears can stop: God has prepared a feast.

But he can't – or at least he won't – force us to eat it. We have been invited to share what he has provided but the onus is on us to say if we will or won't take part. We have the printed invitation in our hands. God's has given us the freedom to say yes or no because that is how he works – in everything. We are his first choice. So will we go?

Obviously this is just a story and so we can pass by the bit where those receiving the invitations beat up the postmen. That's all to do with Jewish history which needn't concern us right now. But we can appreciate how God persists with this process: he sends out a second invitation – even at £1.25 a time! But, as the tale goes, the people on the guest list *made light of it*, claiming pretty unconvincing prior engagements for not going.

Reading between the lines we get the impression that this was a top drawer event, with the invites issued to those 'who were something': the cream of society, the privileged, the ones who already had more than enough of their own.

So the King is forced to make a new decision: *if they won't come, go into the streets, and invite the people whom we would never have considered before, the good and the bad, and let them come.* He's not going to give in and he's not going to let all that food go to waste. It will just be enjoyed by different people...

And we can hear where this parable is taking us. For the King read God; for the wedding invitation read a general invitation to have faith; for the first invitees, read those who have a direct opportunity to hear the Gospel but who cannot be bothered to take any notice.

***For the King read God:* and what do we see? A vulnerable and loving God who gives us the choice whether to follow him or not. Gives you and me the choice – and looking around here this morning we know we are in a pretty small minority. Where are the others?**

This week our TV screens and all the news media have been filled with the appalling tragedy of Gaza. A well planned attack by Hamas against the much-vaunted security wall between Gaza and Israel was preceded by a devastating rocket attack. Then highly trained fighters flew hang-gliders and motorized paragliders to secure the terrain while bulldozers created massive holes in the wire fences to allow four-wheel drive vehicles to flood into the kibbutz settlements with such devastating loss of life.

And we cry out with horror at all that has taken place, and with sorrow for all those – on both sides of this terrible conflict – who have lost loved ones.

And the God who sent out his invitations to celebrate together his gift of life with a sumptuous feast: what is he making of all this?

Is it not another Good Friday?

On the first Good Friday the innocent Jesus was crucified so that we could have the chance of going to heaven. And there have been millions of Good Fridays since then, where the innocent have been robbed of their lives, their homes and their communities – simply because those in power have turned their back on God’s invitation to live in peace. History is littered with such invitations and those first called have repeatedly turned their backs and gone their own ways. And our vulnerable God has had to watch his Son die, time and time and time again.

But look, there is yet one more twist to this difficult story: of the man who is discovered not to be wearing the wedding garment that the host would have traditionally issued to his guests. For whatever reason the man has refused to wear the clothes provided: he wanted to be different.

This has always puzzled me. As someone who doesn’t often enjoy ‘going along with crowd’, I have some empathy for him. But Jesus is making a bigger point here – about what today we would call the ‘me too’ movement typified by the song of the same name (‘Me too’) in which Meghan Trainor invites her listeners to be - not just bright and confident - but determined not to allow other’s peoples values, ideas and needs to over-ride their own. It is the selfish meme that has had researchers buzzing for some time.

Brian Boyd, a researcher at Harvard, for example, in his latest Darwinian book, *the Origin of Stories*, says that in normal face to face conversations, over 40% of the time consists of people talking about themselves – a figure that doubles when it is on social media! He says *E-mail inboxes for example, along with Twitter and Instagram, simply tap into an attention-focusing mechanism that's perfectly designed to make sure we don't lose interest in Job No. 1, which is to keep us noticed.*

And what is God making of all this too?

Surely it is to draw our attention to the contrast between the invitation – in whatever shape or form it comes, the vulnerable expression which reaches out to people with offers of generosity in a bigger group and - the endless communications which are only concerned with what we want and our freedom to choose what to do with our time.

I have no more solution to offer to solve the strife in Gaza than anyone else but we can't help but see that the failure to talk together and to share the experiences of people who are not the same, lies at the heart of it all. The wonderfully brave campaign by Rachel Corrie, just 23 years old, who was killed by an Israeli Bulldozer when trying to protest about the demolition of over 1000 Palestinian homes in Gaza some years ago stands out as just one example of that desire to foster good communication.

Jesus uses the familiar image of the wedding feast as an example of how desperately he wants us to value people who are not the same as us – and to accept that we will often be rebuffed as a result. And to say that if that happens, then perhaps (if we can mix our metaphors) to cast our net even wider, searching out those who we wouldn't otherwise have thought of – including the odd balls who may not want to do things our way!

Church life is never tidy, never completely 'satisfactory', because there will always be new challenges and new people to reach out to. That is what it has meant to focus here at St James' on being a 'parish church', with our doors wide open to anyone and everyone.

Yes, many will turn around and go and do something else; and yes, that will hurt. But a vulnerable God looks for vulnerable disciples, people who will go on sending out invitations in the hope that the feast he offers will not go to waste. Today we thank God that invitations are constantly being sent out – here in Islington – and there, in Gaza.