

Love So Amazing ...

... demands my soul, my life, my all

A sermon given on the Nineteenth Sunday of Trinity, 15th October 2023 by the Revd Canon Phil Stone, Director of the Scargill Movement, in Beverley Minster

Matthew 22:1-14

Gracious, loving God. We thank you for your Holy Presence with us now and we thank you for your Holy Word. May our hearts and our lives be open to your Holy Spirit and your Word to us now. And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Thank you, Jonathan, for your lovely warm welcome. It has been a joy to meet many of you yesterday in the 'Press Pause' and what a joy it is to be in such a beautiful and inspiring space like this - I have a bit of a 'wow' going on within me as I am standing here in this beautiful space.

As Jonathan said, I'm the community leader and director of the Scargill movement, which is based at Scargill House, nestled in the Wharfedale, and it's the home of a Christian community. And it's lovely to see some faces here that I know well who visit us regularly. The community is ecumenical, international, intergenerational, and our gift (what we try to be) is the gift of hospitality within a place of prayer. And we try our very best, as it says in our 'community promises' - to honour and accept all who come through our doors. So it is a place of retreat, it's a place where people can encounter, we pray, the love of God. And at the heart of what we're about is lives shared, lives transformed, with Jesus at the centre.

Jesus was all about bringing change and transformation and through the Holy Spirit, that is what God is still doing today, showing the depth of God's love for His world. This morning we sang 'How deep the Father's love for us' at the 0915 service. And in Jesus we see that love fully - *'the image of the invisible God'*, Paul says, about Jesus, and Jesus teaches and shares his deep desire to see the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. It's a good prayer for all of us, isn't it? To see God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. And today Jesus gives us a parable which, to be honest, isn't easy to understand: I have struggled with it; it makes me feel uncomfortable; it makes me think, which is a good thing; and it challenges me.

The parable is the invitation to a wedding banquet, a wedding feast. And only last Monday we were privileged to celebrate a wedding at Scargill for a former community member, and our parable here is the invitation that is given by a king - it's a top notch invite - it would

have come in an envelope with golden letters on, beautifully done and beautifully written. A wedding banquet is a celebration: it's a celebration of love; it's a celebration of joy; there would have been dancing; there would have been laughter; there would have been good food; wine that flows; it's an invitation into the love of God.

The parable today has a similar feel to last week's parable of the parable of the tenants. In today's parable, the guests are invited; they refuse to come; they make light of it; they get on with their business - I wonder what excuse I or you would give to this invitation. And some actually seize and kill those who brought the invitation, and the king reacts violently, it says. Reading about this particular parable, some commentators think that this could be the reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, soon after Jesus. And then the King says to his servants, "Go therefore into the main streets, invite everyone you find into the wedding banquet." And we read that the banquet hall was full with the good and the bad - all who were found were brought in to the wedding banquet.

And we can realise that we too are one of these guests: the parable is speaking that the invitation to God's kingdom is open to all; the doors are flung open; all are welcome.

Some years ago, I and my wife Di lived and worked in Whitechapel in East London and we ran a home for single homeless people. And my role was to go and befriend people and then bring them back home to our little community house where Di managed it very well indeed - woe betide anybody who didn't behave themselves. And I befriended an elderly gentleman called Titch. He was called Titch because he was very small and he used to live in a cardboard box in Spitalfields Market, where every morning at 03:00 he would help unload the fruit and veg from the lorries that used to come in then - it's changed so much now. Titch came and lived with us and began to sort his life - he was welcome. Rowan Williams writes, 'Being with Jesus means being in the company of the people whose company Jesus seeks.' Bit of a mouthful, isn't it? I'll read it again - 'Being with Jesus means being in the company of the people whose company Jesus seeks.' The doors are flung open, all are welcome, the good and the bad.

I don't know if any of you have had an opportunity to watch 'The Two Popes' on Netflix. It's a wonderful film - I've just watched it three times. There's a wonderful quote by the future Pope and he says this, 'Did Jesus build walls? His face is a face of mercy - the bigger the sinner, the warmer the welcome.' Isn't that wonderful? 'The bigger the sinner, the warmer the welcome' - mercy is the dynamite that blows down walls.

One of the beautiful lines in one of our Eucharistic prayers, 'He opened wide his arms upon the cross.' I wonder what words are conjured up in your minds and hearts when you

hear that phrase, 'He opened wide his arms upon the cross.' Perhaps the word sacrifice; or acceptance; or welcome; or generosity; or invitation; or vulnerability. And perhaps those beautiful life-giving words, mercy or grace. 'He opened his arms wide upon the cross.' And it's a costly grace. And that grace we celebrate and enter into in a few moments time, as we gather around the Lord's table. The invitation to the banquet will bring transformation. We cannot be the same when we begin to experience the love of God, His invitation into His love - something new is happening within us. Anne Lamott wrote 'God loves you exactly as you are and far too much to leave you as you are.' In the parable we have the person who turns up in the wrong clothing and he is thrown out - that's another bit that's hard to understand.

What happened to Titch, the story I said about the man I met in Whitechapel, what happened to him? He came and lived with us; he felt uncomfortable about sleeping in a bed and would sleep on the floor; he would come into my little office and say, "Am I doing all right? Am I doing okay?" And eventually he moved down to another community that we work with, a long-stay community out in Kent. And there he became a Christian. And it was a joy to go to his baptism and it was also a privilege and a joy to do his funeral after he died.

The invitation to the banquet demands a response; the invitation to grace is a call to kingdom living; it's a call to discipleship. So what are the clothes of the kingdom? If our guy in the Parable was wearing the wrong clothes, what are the clothes of the kingdom? Maybe Paul gives us a flavour or shows us the design, I should say, of the clothes of the kingdom. In one of his letters he says, *"Therefore, as God's chosen people wholly and dearly loved, clothe yourselves (Clothe yourselves!) with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another. If any of you has a grievance against someone, forgive as the Lord has forgiven you. And on all these virtues put on love which binds everything together in perfect unity."*

Love always looks like something: kingdom clothes; forgiving one another; lives full of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Jackie Pullinger, who went to work in the 80s in the Walled City in Hong Kong working with prostitutes and drug addicts said, "I just wish the Holy Spirit would work more and more in the lives of Christians to give us soft hearts, hearts full of compassion and hard feet to go to the places where no one else will go." So real love is not a feeling, but is offered an experience - invisible, tangible forms: spending time with someone who is lonely; feeding the hungry; fighting for justice alongside those who have no voice; bringing healing and forgiveness to a broken world.

And don't we want to pray for God's kingdom to break through, to see glimmers of glory?
And so we pray and cry out today for the people of Israel and Palestine that God's
kingdom will break through where there is so much hate and so much pain. We pray your
kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

The Gospel, the good News of Jesus, would always tell us that we are loved. There's an
invitation to His banquet, whoever we've been, however we feel. God's love is tender and
draws us back. A love that restores our dignity and the beautiful love that he has bestowed
upon us. And so I just want to finish with a poem. You will know this poem, many of you.
It's from George Herbert and is an invitation to his table and to eat with him:

*LOVE bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lack'd anything.*

*'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here.'
 Love said, 'You shall be he.'
'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
 I cannot look on Thee.'
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
 'Who made the eyes but I?'*

*'Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.'
'And know you not,' says Love, 'Who bore the blame?'
 'My dear, then I will serve.'
'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat.'
 So I did sit and eat.*

Loving Jesus, Love, so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.

Reading Text

Matthew 21:1-14

¹Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ²'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴Again 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."⁵ But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. ⁷The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet."¹⁰ Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. ¹¹'But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹²and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. ¹³Then 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."¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen.