

## **MATTHEW 22.1-14, PHILIPPIANS 4.1-9**

The Wedding Feast and Choosing our thoughts

11<sup>th</sup> October 2020 online.

Father, grant that our minds may be filled by you and with you.  
Amen.

Both these passages have a special place in my heart. The verses from Philipians are what I chose to write out and give to each of my boys as they were leaving home to go and make their own way in the world. It seemed the best advice I could give them. The Gospel reading always makes me smile because the last words, "For many are called but few are chosen" remind me of going to a little weekday service with my old Mum down in our home town of Chertsey. It was a chilly morning and the heating had not been up to scratch and at the end the old folk were complaining, but the churchwarden, a lovely man, said, "Don't worry, my friends, for many are cold but few are frozen." I shall pause here while you quietly groan, especially as some of you may have heard me tell that tale before!

It's an important verse: Many are called, or in the Good News translation, many are invited, but few are chosen. This parable about the wedding feast is all about God's invitation to us, his loving, welcoming grace, his offer to us to live in his presence and enjoy the good things he has in store for us. It is about God's sorrow and anger when we decline that gracious invitation, when we decide we haven't got time for all this God stuff, or we think we can manage without, thank-you, because we have better, more important things to do. It's not that they are bad things in themselves, but so often "we hear the claims of this world so insistently that the soft invitation of the voice of Christ cannot be heard", (as William Barclay puts it.)

That breaks God's heart, because he KNOWS what we need, and over and over again he sees us turning our back on what is good and right for us. He watches, with a mixture of sorrow and anger, as we are "so busy making a living that we fail to make a life; we can be so busy with the administration and the organization of life that we

forget life itself". We're so busy with second bests, that we miss out on the very best.

The parable reminds us that we have a choice. The offer of God's grace, of life lived with him as King, is always there, always open to us. But we have to choose to accept that invitation. And when we do accept, the parable shows us that this comes with responsibility. God grants us the free will to choose to follow him, or not. He will never force us. But once we have committed our way to him and accepted his love and grace, things will change. We have to be willing to be changed – as that great hymn puts it "changed from glory into glory till in heaven we take our place."

God loves us as we are, all of us. YES. That's what Jesus came to show us. But God also sees us as we could be, as he always intended us to be. And by his grace, he transforms us ever more into his likeness; he longs to make us to be more like Jesus. For that to happen, we have to be willing to bring him our whole selves, to offer him our very best.

Once we have accepted the invitation to God's feast, we need to prepare ourselves accordingly. This is not cheap grace. It is not to be taken for granted. We can't just say, Thanks, God, that's decent of you; yes, I'll come and enjoy the feast . . . but on my own terms. We can't just turn up in our rough old clothes. We can't just give God the fag end of our day, or a bit of attention on a Sunday morning. We must be willing to be changed, as Anne said the other week, by the complete renewing of our mind.

The wedding clothes God asks us to wear have nothing to do with a fashion parade: they stand for the spirit, the inner clothes of our soul, of our heart and our mind; 'the garment of expectation, the garment of humble penitence, the garment of faith, the garment of reverence' (W Barclay) – these are the garments we need to put on as we approach God. We need to prepare ourselves, to think about what we are doing as we come to worship, and to offer God our best.

After all, you wouldn't go to a wedding wearing your gardening clothes; you get dressed up out of respect and affection for the couple getting married, to show them that they are special to you. As we accept God's loving invitation to receive his life in us, we need to put on the inner clothing that will honour him.

And this is our choice. God will not force us. But he always hopes. And this idea of choice leads me into our reading from Philippians. I have been following a course by Mercy UK, called Keys to Freedom, and just last week I was struck by this story:

"Arianna Walker, the CEO of Mercy UK, tells of a dream she had during a difficult time in her life. It helped her to understand the importance of being responsible for what goes on inside our own minds, instead of assuming that God will do it all for us.

In the dream she saw herself sitting at a large round dining table in a restaurant. Around the table were her guests: Faith, Hope, Love, Joy, Peace, Wisdom and Strength. They chatted, laughed and sang together like the good friends they were. The scene was one of joy, fellowship and friendship.

As Arianna watched the scene in her dream, she became aware of three figures stood over in the shadows. Wondering who they were, she felt the Spirit of God tell her that they were her enemies: Fear, Worry and Unbelief. These enemies stared at her with such hatred that it sent a cold ripple through her body. She asked God: "Why are they here? They don't belong in this place." And He answered: "This restaurant, like your life, is open to the public. Life on earth is an open space that can sometimes be visited by enemies. But who sits at your table is by invitation only." Even in her dream the truth of that statement hit her like a ton of bricks.

As she continued to observe the scene, she saw herself become distracted by the figures at the bar. Each time she would steal a glance in their direction or cease the conversation with her companions she could see them move towards her. Finally Fear stood directly behind the seat of Faith, and the entire scene stood

still. Everyone went quiet. The tension was palpable in the air as both Fear and Faith looked her directly in the eyes. And then she heard the voice of God: "There are no more seats at your table and Faith will not share her seat with Fear. Choose your companions wisely."

Arianna woke up and realised the battles she faced would be won or lost in her mind and in her thoughts. Our external world will always be open to the presence of our enemies, but what goes on inside our heads – our thoughts and our beliefs – is within our area of responsibility to manage and direct. God will help us if we ask Him, but He will not usurp our authority and 'brain-wash' us."

It is important to realise that we DO NOT HAVE TO think about whatever pops into our heads. Thoughts will come to us uninvited and we cannot always control what thoughts land in our heads, but WE CAN CHOOSE WHICH THOUGHTS WE PONDER ON, or allow to sit at our table, as it were. You have control over what you think about. Just as we exercise control over our bodies and how we behave, God expects us to exercise control over our minds and what we think. We choose what thoughts we agree with in the same way we choose to forgive or choose to say yes to Christ. It takes our will to say yes, and then our actions must support that choice. We accept the invitation to God's feast and then we dress ourselves accordingly. The Holy Spirit gives us divine encouragement and empowerment to think the right kind of thoughts – His thoughts, not ours.

Surely this is what St Paul is talking about when he says to us: "And now, my friends, all that is true, all that is noble, all that is just and pure, all that is loveable and attractive, whatever is excellent and admirable – fill your thoughts with these things." It is said that we are what we eat, that the food we put into our body determines what our body becomes. In the same way, we become what we think, what we feed our minds and hearts on determines who we become. And God wants us to become like Jesus. So, to use a good Yorkshire expression, think on! Amen.

