

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

Matthew 22:1-14

Once more Jesus spoke to the chief priests and Pharisees in parables, saying: ² “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³ He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴ Again 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, ⁶ while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. ⁷ The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸ Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹ Go 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, ¹² and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. ¹³ Then 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.”

Well, I am glad it was Paul’s job and not mine to read that gospel passage! Jesus seems to be saying on the one hand that ‘everyone is welcome’, but on the other ‘few are chosen’. This seemingly mixed message means that the Parable of the Wedding Feast – with its sting in the tail about judgment – can make us feel uncomfortable.

In our discomfort let’s remember that God wants only the *best* for us. This means he wants us to become the best we can be. As the theologian Tom Wright puts it, ‘God wants us to be grown up, not babies, and part of being grown up is that we learn that actions have consequences, that moral choices matter, that real life is not like a game of chess where even if we do badly the pieces can be put back in the box, ready to start again tomorrow.’

So the ‘clothes’ to be worn in the kingdom of God are truth, justice, excellence; holiness: the qualities espoused by St Paul in our second reading. If we are saying to ourselves or to others that it doesn’t really matter if we ‘wear’ something different then we are devaluing the kingdom of God. And what does that say about our judgment of God, never mind his judgment of us?

Let’s be honest: this is a difficult message. Many of us would say that amidst the pressures of life – particularly in these challenging times – we are doing our best. Some of us might even judge that there are plenty of examples of behaviour elsewhere in society where a bit of ‘growing up’ is needed. By contrast, a few of us will find it genuinely hard to believe that God can love us as we are, unconditionally. We might

then feel in any reference to God's judgment that he is bound to punish us, to consign us to a place of 'weeping and gnashing of teeth'.

But ultimately none of that is helpful – on this day after 'World Mental Health Day', or any other. What is helpful is the assurance that we need simply to relax into God's love. We need only remember that God loves us for who we are, not what we can do for him. Each human being is his precious child, and that includes you and me. In only wanting the best for us his children God prompts us and guides us within the everyday reality of our lives to change ourselves and our circumstances – usually in small, incremental steps. If we fail to take one opportunity then another is given. And over time, if we look back we will see just how far we have come, by his grace. But we do need to keep changing, to keep 'growing up'.

I am reminded here of the culture of our schools. Many of us will be aware that at Richmond School the idea of the students being encouraged to become 'the best they can be' is now literally legendary. But in fact, for any student – as for us – to be content with doing our best is simply not good enough! We have to strive to become *better* than our best!

A small example. In the primary school of my last parish the Year 3 children were given a challenge at this time each year, Harvest-time. In support of a good cause, and in line with the 'Parable of the Talents', each Year 3 class was given £10 and invited to use it to raise more. In the first year, they raised over £600! In each of the following years they raised progressively more! They really were doing better than their best!

Perhaps we can learn from that example. We have been given so much by our loving, generous God – something we acknowledged with thanksgiving at our Harvest Festival last week. God wills us to use what we have been given in a loving, generous way ourselves, to make the world a better place – and in so doing to grow towards fulfilling our God-given potential. God wills us to work together as good stewards of the talents, time and resources we have each been given.

Each year, it is good to carry out a 'stewardship review' – to reflect prayerfully on how we are using our time, talents and resources. And when better to do this than now, at Harvest-time, when we are reminded of all God's good gifts around us?

As we each strive by God's grace to become 'better than our best' we want to keep 'growing up', to become ever more Christlike, so that we can eventually be fully 'clothed' in the values of God's kingdom: truth, justice, excellence; holiness.

Holiness. You will have heard or read about the new resources being offered by our Diocese to help us grow in holiness. These resources come under the banner of the 'Rhythm of Life'. I wrote about this venture in the September Parish Magazine. And Bishop Nick has said this:

"During the Covid 19 crisis, we've had to adjust to very different rhythms of life. As Christians, we believe Jesus should be at the heart of our rhythms of life, whatever our

circumstances. This will have a far-reaching impact on our own wellbeing and the good of others – on our *loving, living and learning*.

“I would like to invite you to join the diocesan ‘Rhythm of Life’ venture. This will involve individual commitments, accessing resources and mutual support. Some key

areas will be given special attention: praying, encouraging, sharing, reflecting, celebrating, resting and creating.

“There are four simple steps:

Taking stock

Making one or more practical commitments

Participating with others

Reviewing your commitments periodically.”

Over the next few weeks our Sunday sermons will explore different aspects of adopting a Rhythm of Life. This week, I am simply inviting you to consider how and when to be taking stock and reviewing your commitments.

So if our ‘stewardship’ of our time, talents and resources covers more than our finances, it certainly includes them! If you are not a member of our Planned Giving scheme here at St Mary’s then please be asking yourself why. And please help yourself to one of the Stewardship Packs at the back of the church. In there you will find all the information and the forms that you need to join.

As food for thought you may be interested to know that as at the end of September – three-quarters of the way through the year – we had been able to make just half of our Parish Share payments to the Diocese. Truly, these are challenging times for us all, but as our new Archbishop, Stephen, has said of a living faith, ‘there is a way of inhabiting life that is joyful and hopeful, even in the midst of a pandemic’.

In the coming days and weeks, let’s reflect in faith and joy and hope on our stewardship of the time, talents, and resources we have been given. And on how we are to become ‘clothed’ in the values of God’s kingdom. As we do so, let’s also remember that because God wants only the very best for us he wills us and enables us to become ‘better than our best’.

I close with a verse from scripture, a verse I sometimes use in my own Rhythm of Life, which includes meditation on God’s holy Word and thereby learning of him. It comes from Isaiah, chapter 28: ‘The Lord is wonderful in his counsel and excellent in his wisdom’.

Thanks be to God for his good gifts and for his good grace. Amen.