



We Come as Guests Invited

A sermon by Revd Katherine Hedderly

Readings: Philippians 4.1-9; Matthew 22.1-14

This week someone described to me the preparation that they were making for the funeral of their mother, arrangements which were being done with such love, attention and care. The funeral director had said bring clothes for her that she would have worn for a special occasion. This struck a chord, their mum had been given the Royal Maundy money by the Queen last year and had a suit especially for the day. Then there was a brooch that she always wore. Best clothes, it felt right and proper and special, that these will be the clothes for this last particular occasion that honours her life with thanksgiving. When my father in law died earlier in the year I brought an expensive designer dress to wear at the funeral that I knew that he would have loved to see me wearing. It seemed important and fitting to do that.

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus uses the wearing of appropriate clothing that honours the occasion, to tell us something about God's kingdom. In this challenging parable, of an invitation to a wedding feast, even what the guest wears who is invited last minute, from the streets and unprepared, matters and is noticed by the king in the final part of this story. Although what then happens to him, because he is not wearing the right thing, seems particularly unjust.

At these special times, of thanksgiving or celebration, we put on our best clothes and try to match on the outside what our feelings and hopes are on the inside; the loving honouring of someone's life, our joy as two people commit their lives to one another, hopes for the future and a celebration of love. Remember the last time you had something special to wear for an occasion like this, a coat, a dress, a suit, I wonder how it made you feel.

In this story of the lavish wedding feast, Jesus is trying to teach his hearers about the generous life of God's kingdom that we are all invited into. It calls from us a particular way to live and respond, reflecting in our lives, in 'our outward clothes' what we have been generously invited into – the love that we have been clothed with 'on the inside'.

And isn't that what Paul is getting at in his letter to the church in Philippi, in his final words, urging them to lives that are honourable and true and just, thinking and doing the things that draw them to God and reflect his life within them. 'Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me and the God of peace will be with you.'¹ A way of life to 'wear' and wrap around you and share with others everyday, not just for special occasions. We are all invited into that life of the kingdom, to receive that love that we are to 'wear' and model.

The reaction of those who are initially invited to the wedding feast is not to rush out and buy a new suit or dress and go to the party, but to turn away, to their own interests, and concerns, turning their backs and insulting the generosity of the king. Not just that but some respond with violent hatred towards him, and rejection of the Son he is honouring. There are other invitations that often seem more important, than the constant beckoning of God.

¹ Phil. 4. 8-9

This parable is confusing and the picture of God it portrays is difficult to understand. On the one hand he is pictured like a king offering an invitation with generous and open hospitality. But also wrathfully seeking vengeance and harshly judgmental. And the picture of the invited guests is also confusing and fickle. Guests who turn their backs, are disinterested, and violent even in the face of overwhelming generosity, guests who come, a mixed bunch - both the good and the bad, guests that are ill prepared. It is bewildering and hard to find our place in it.

The thread that runs through it is the invitation that, despite the opposition, keeps on coming. When the first set of guests do not come, another set of messengers are sent. When they are killed more are sent into the main streets and everyone who is found is invited. The invitation is made again and again, until the wedding hall is full of guests. The dogged determination of God to invite and gather us, all of us, those who are on the streets, those who are privileged, people who are good and people who are bad, to share in the feast at his table.

This week three women were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, in recognition of their efforts and determination to bring peace despite setbacks, despite being ignored or facing opposition or violence. Each in their own way have continued to offer that invitation of peace, again and again in their own communities and countries and through that have gathered others around them; have built hope and changed lives.

Tawahul Karman the journalist and peace campaigner working for women's rights and democracy in Yemen, and one of the powerful voices from those countries witnessing the Arab Spring. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, president of Liberia, who has moved her country on, working to improve economic and social development after years of civil war. And Leymah Gbowee, also from Liberia, described as a peace warrior. The women she mobilised, came together to pray and protest day after day, wearing white shirts, defying the warlords and helped the push towards peace in that country. Her goal she says after receiving the reward, is 'to ensure that there is absolute peace in Africa and the rest of the world'. What an invitation – welcoming *all* to the table.

The white shirts she and the women gathered around her wore, were a symbol of the kind of life *they* were modelling in the face of war and opposition - peaceful, prayerful, loving, gentle, hopeful, and also defiant, strong and powerful. Women, often ignored or overlooked, rejected, victims of violence and brutality, especially in war, they continued to hold out that invitation to all people out of love for their families, for their communities and for their country. And that loving peaceful inviting presence brought transformation.

This is the kind of invitation that Christ holds out to us, that welcomes us, that we are invited to live out in our own settings and communities and places where we live and work. And all are invited and all are called to model in our own way that gentle, strong, powerful love that welcomes all and transforms communities. As we take up that invitation and model his way of life, we begin to live with that feeling of what it is like to wear those clothes we put on for special occasions. Aware of God's love and presence within us, wrapped around us, lived through us.

Like the sense of urgency in the parable, with the food prepared and ready to be eaten, there is a sense of urgency. Our world is hungry for that generous invitation and shared life of Christ.

Receive the generous invitation. Put on your best clothes of gentleness, prayer and thanksgiving, live the life just where you are, as an invited guest of God, and play your own part in welcoming all to the table. Where bread is broken, love is shared, peace is made and *all our lives* are transformed.