**Sermon 12/10/14**

**Matthew 22:1-14**

“For many are called, but few are chosen”

May I speak in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit

This parable of the wedding banquet, I admit, was one that filled me with fear and confusion when I was younger and attempting to navigate my way through Christian scripture with my limited understanding. From surface level reading it seems to be somewhat contradictory to the nature of the loving and merciful God that I was taught about in Sunday School. Is God really so petty as to have someone forcibly ejected from the meal because they were not wearing the right clothing?

If we delve deeper into the allegory that Jesus uses and Matthew conveys to us, I hope it should become more clear. This is another stark warning from Jesus, spoken to the religious leaders of the age, the banquet is eternal life, redemption by God, offered through Christ to the first guests, the Jewish people, the chosen and invited ones. However, they reject Christ, harking back to the parable that we heard last week with the tenants in the vineyard. So, the feast is opened up to other people, those found out in the streets, the good and the bad, in this allegory this is the Gentiles, all the non-Jewish community. This is not an uncommon theme in New Testament teaching, that the Jewish community rejected the prophets, ending with John the Baptist, and as a result, refused to accept Christ as messiah. Later Jesus will tell his disciples to go into all of the world to gather people to himself, just as the servants do for the banquet in this story.

God is not being exclusive, He is prepared to meet all people, the invitation to access him is open to everyone and if those initial chosen and invited find that distasteful then, this parable implies, that they should have done something about it. Perhaps if this was being retold now it would be in the context of someone who complains about the actions of a government but always has an excuse as to why they didn’t vote.

So far, so good. God has made an offer to the chosen, they have refused, not just simply saying ‘no thank you’ but making light of the invitation, returning to work or even mistreating the messengers. Falling foul of the ways of the world. So the invitation is extended and those who never expected to be invited, those who were always told by the chosen that they couldn’t be invited, accept gladly. And then we have this strange change of tone.

Someone is ejected from the banquet for not wearing the right clothing. As I said, is God so petty that clothing matters? Also, this character never expected to be invited to the banquet so how could he possibly have the correct clothing? But this is a stark warning to those who believe themselves to be already ‘in’ so to speak, those who are completely sure of their own salvation. Perhaps this is levied especially at the Religious Leaders, as was Jesus’ frequent challenge.

What does it mean then for us in this time and in this place?

Each of us have been invited, recently a baptism and confirmation was held here, two more people accepted the invitation that God placed before them, they, in the context of this parable, turned up to the feast, joyfully, gladly. As I think back to my own baptism, confirmation and then eventually ordination I can remember how pleasing it was to accept the invitation, to join the party.

But this parable, as well as pointing us firmly to what is to come in the Kingdom of God, it holds a strong challenge. We need to be examining our lives and scrutinising if we are ‘wearing the correct clothing’ – there is no point in us saying that we have an invitation, even brandishing at people to show them we have it, if we are not dressed and ready for the event.

We must strive to be ready for the party, whenever that may start, and there are many ways in which we can do this. Prayer is hugely important as we attempt to become closer to Christ, to understanding God, to perfecting ourselves in him. The more interaction we have in prayer, the more deeply that the enter into it, the more we will gain from it as we come closer to the will of God. I recently attended a reflective day on Julian of Norwich, a English anchorite who gave her life to God to sit in a cell attached to a church and pray. One of pieces of commentary from the day that stuck out for me was the phrase ‘If your mind is a circus you cannot expect to have a fulfilling prayer life’ – if we are so caught up, so jumbled up in the stresses and strains of daily life, we won’t be able to get closer to God.

We need to take time, to prepare our minds, our hearts, our bodies. One of the reasons that the church uses Sunday, traditionally a working day, for it’s day to glorify God is because it means that those who responded to the call upon their life to become a follower had to re-orientate their diary to attend, just as we need to re-orientate our lives. But now as Sunday is normal and that meaning is not communicated we are very good at finding other ways to fill up our time and squeeze God out. We return to work, we return to our chores. In between the services on a Sunday I fall victim to that, ill just write that email or file those papers or note down my expenses or whatever it may be. Suddenly God does not get my Sunday he gets a little bit of it.

The church is quite good at recognising seasons and putting in periods of time for reflection. We will soon be in Advent, a time of preparation for the celebration of the Birth of Christ. I would like to leave you with a pre-advent challenge, if I may, what are you going to do to ensure that you are ready for the banquet? Take some time to draw more closely to God. Come to morning or evening prayer, make time each day to read the scriptures, take a quiet day, perhaps short daily prayers such as the Benedictine prayer book or the rosary, a pilgrimage, even a day long one, or more regular attendance at Mass. don’t just use that little bit of Sunday in amongst the other stuff but carve out time, deliberately, re-orientate your diary so that you may re-orientate your lives. And please, make sure I am doing it too.