11 October 2020: Eucharist Sermon  
The Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity  
Philippians 4:1–9, Matthew 22:1–14  
The Revd Philippa White, Succentor and School Chaplain

+may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our strength and our salvation

This is the third week of parables in a row. Two weeks ago: two unsatisfactory sons and a vineyard. Last week: a vineyard with murderous tenants who came to a sticky end. This week: no vineyard, but sticky ends all round.
Parables are tricky. As soon as Jesus says ‘the Kingdom of heaven is like’ we’re starting to look for what each separate bit means. The Kingdom of heaven is like this – then the king must be God – oh wait no, he’s committing genocide and burning down cities…

So let’s start somewhere else. Jesus is telling us a story about human behaviour. And the humans in this story whose behaviour I’m particularly interested in are those who are invited, but refuse to come.

I wonder why? Most people like weddings, parties, being invited. I do. Why do these people decide they’re washing their hair instead?
There are two reasons why we might – if we didn’t actually send the messenger away, much less murder him – certainly wish we could.
One is jealous resentment. You know the sort of thing.
‘Why’s he inviting all those other people as well as me? They’re nowhere near the same class.’
Or ‘Who does he think he is anyway? The Crown Prince’s wedding? They think they’re too good for us.’

Second: mistrust.
‘What does he want from me? I’ll pay one way or another. He wants me to support him over some hare-brained policy. Not worth the risk.’
Either way – they’re projecting. They act in bad faith; they assume the king is acting in bad faith; although they’ve been invited, they refuse to engage with the invitation – with the king’s invitation which may be compared to the kingdom of heaven.

At the end of the parable, the bloke who comes in without a wedding robe is a different kind of refusal to engage with the invitation. Given that the slaves had dragged in everyone they saw from the street, and only one person didn’t have a wedding robe, there must have been some scheme for enrobing the surprised guests. And that means our robeless man chose to reject what he was offered.

And again our question: why?
Why does he decide against dressing up in the clothes he’s offered and come instead in grubby jeans? Pride.
‘If he really wants me at the party he won’t care what I’m wearing. Anyway, why should I dress up for him? He’s no better than the rest of us. My gardening clothes are good enough for their party…’

Two kinds of bad behaviour: refusing the invitation – out of jealous resentment or mistrust – or refusing out of pride to engage with the party once you’re there. And the king doesn’t like it. Those who refuse the invitation are destroyed; the one who won’t engage is consigned to outer darkness, weeping and gnashing teeth. To quote the exceptionally quotable Robert Farrer Capon – those in the outer darkness are ‘a bunch of unreconstructed haters who threw away the best deal they were ever offered and now can’t find anybody but themselves to be furious with.’

This, then, is a parable about the bad behaviour – jealousy, resentment, mistrust, pride – by which we can throw away the deal God offers us, the grace God extends to us. Jesus tells this series of parables primarily to the chief priests – religious professionals. That makes them parables for me; for my Chapter colleagues; for any of us who think that we’re insiders, we’re God’s special people.

Of course we’re God’s people – God’s invited people – but we mustn’t be tempted to think we’re God’s special people. We are only as special as everyone else. Seeing ourselves as particularly special leads to precisely the pride, resentment, mistrust that leads the people in the parable to reject God’s offered grace. It leads, too, to the more than bad behaviour that we’ve seen so horrifically exposed this week in the publication of the report into this Church’s failure to take safeguarding seriously: people who think themselves above God’s laws, who think their clergy colleagues are above suspicion, who think the invitation God extends is primarily for people like themselves – not those who are vulnerable, damaged, powerless.
This is not a parable about those shocking and shaming failures and I’m not going to insult survivors by trying to make it so. But it is a parable that reminds me as a religious insider that God’s invitation isn’t primarily for me. That if I ever think God invited me first, that only means there are more ways I can get it wrong. That I must not probe the grace extended to others. This is between me and God; as soon as I start asking why God lets other people into the kingdom, I’m putting myself above them, assuming I’m worth more. At worst I will injure others; at best I put myself outside the scope of the kingdom. All I need to do is accept God’s invitation with proper humility and proper joy. Saying neither ‘I should be good enough on my own merits, I don’t need your robe;’ nor ‘I don’t want to be here and I’m not going to dress up for your son’s silly wedding;’ nor ‘why do you value these other people as much as ME?’ If that’s my attitude, I’m aligning myself with the unreconstructed haters in the outer darkness. No, the answer is always only ‘yes, I’ll come, and thank you!’ And the good news is that however resentful or proud or jealous we may have been – I may have been – in the past, there’s always a way back. God is not like the king in the parable – he doesn’t destroy us, or burn our city; he does not tie us up and throw us into a dark pit. No, God continues to invite us in and offer us a wedding robe and a place at the table.

The challenge is only to respond. Amen.

1 Capon; Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: paradox, outrage, and vindication in the parables of Jesus (Eerdmans 2002), p. 137