

A GENEROUS INVITATION

Matthew 22:1-14

Introduction

I don't know about you but I love a good over-the-top stories for relaxation. And there is no doubt about Matthew can put together some good over-the-top stories out of the parables of Jesus. He does that here with the offensive and outrageous behaviour of the first guests, their choosing to do other activities, ignoring 3 invitations and killing the messengers (the couriers).

The king's reaction is also over-the-top and elides into a military situation.

Yet, invitation is such a beautiful word. It speaks of outreaching hands, generosity, new things, friendship, connections and welcome. But violence and disdain surround it here.

Context

This is the third parable in reply to the question about authority that the leaders put to Jesus. We are still in the same conversation.

Remember that Jesus has entered Jerusalem, overturned the tables in the Temple, upset the elites with the prophetic action of withering

the fig tree, a telling image of fruitlessness. Who gave you authority? That is the question.

Today, he presses issue harder.

At base this is a simple story that envisages common life. It worked like this. You announce that you were having a party, in this case a wedding, on a certain day. People would know you were getting it ready and watch the preparations with mounting anticipation. When it was ready to roll you sent word to all those who had been invited. And when they don't turn up you send out more invitations.

The invitees refuse, doing other tasks they think as more important. Some even abuse the couriers. Imagine the embarrassment if hardly anyone turned up! What does that say? It is a total dishonour. It is the greatest shame and insult the invitees can offer their ruler. It even suggests that they question the security of the king's future. It seems stupid beyond belief to be so extremely insulting to one of extreme power.

So the person throwing the party decided that the best thing would be to invite everyone in the village whom they ran across. It is a bit like social media invites and it worked. Like many of Jesus'

parables, the experience would have rung bells for people. And the meaning was obvious.

Why were the leaders turning down Jesus' invitation to come into the kingdom?

The kingdom of feasting

Jesus often spoke of the kingdom as *a great feast*. People would come from east and west, north and south to sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The invitation to the kingdom was like coming to a feast, a banquet.

This is a wonderfully rich image if you think about it. Salvation is a feast, a banquet. It meets our needs for food, for community, rich satisfying relationships, for pleasure and joy. Salvation is a party.

And the image is a sharp tool. It comes from Isaiah 25.6;

“On this mountain the Lord of Hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.”

He would have offended his hearers mightily. They cannot provide the feast of God but He can. They are withered fig trees; he is meat and drink for the salvation of all. And right here on the temple Mount. He is the Lord's provision for all the nations.

This is a story about God. This is Israel's Lord redeeming Israel and the world. And the time has begun in Jesus. It tells of God's generosity. It tells of God's patience. He keeps on sending invitations, always opening up the party for any who will come. Even with the murderous and the lax he persists. Even then they could respond to the open invitation.

This is why we *celebrate* the Eucharist. We offer *invitations*. The Eucharist is an *anticipation* of what we only experience in foretaste now. The Eucharist is a vision and agenda of what is to come. It is our participation in that future. That is why it may be both a sober event and a party. Everything that God celebrates we celebrate here. We celebrate welcome and acceptance, we celebrate joy and peace and we celebrate renewed and right relationships between us.

On the other hand, some will read this parable as though God is a miffed God with a pretty violent temper (7). It is one of the over-the-top elements of this story. Who conducts an all-out war while the lamb roast is cooking?

The story reminds us that our conduct of relationships has consequences. We are morally and relationally accountable. To live in loving relationship is one thing: to bring hostility, shaming,

rejection and hatred to a relationship is another. The consequence of the former is communion, the consequence of the latter is separation and conflict; and it is self-chosen.

The rejection of love is the most serious thing we do. God has great pain at the refusal and goes to great lengths to offer the invitation to share in the banquet of his love. The rejection of love is the rejection of God.

We are reminded every day that people still see hatred and malice as ways of being human and resolving the human condition. God will never allow violence, hatred and malice to defeat finally the kingdom of love. God will contest it.

That is not the last word.

The invitation to the feast is for all

The kingdom is also an ***invitation to the streets to the good and bad.***

The invitation is extended to all who will come. This is what Jesus did and the undesirables all turned up to the party. That is you and me! The irreligious, the outcasts the marginalised and eventually the Gentiles became participants in the salvation party.

The king allows both the good and the bad into the dining hall. So open is this invitation to the party that the most undesirable people will come in. You have heard people say that the church is full of bad people even hypocrites. That is how it was meant to be.

The church is always full of sinners and always sinful. We are always a mixed bag because as persons we are mixed bags.

We never quite get it. As churches grow they think of themselves as enclaves of good people or the right people or people like us. The problem is that immediately we think like that we are on a slippery slope towards serious hypocrisy and serious trouble. We close ourselves in on ourselves. Our goals become sustaining everything for ourselves. We no longer know how to look outwards, no longer know the needs of others.

Our church ought to find an eager audience among those not welcome elsewhere. They may be rude and crude, undesirable in polite company and sometimes the behaviour is far from Christ-like.

Matthew conceives of the church as always a missionary body, a body of inviters and invitations, a bunch of welcomers. It is always therefore a mixed bag. Its message is unlikely to gain much of a

hearing among some who will treat it with contempt and serious hostility among others. But that is par for the course.

This leads us to a harder point, a tougher reality yet one we have to face.

The invitation requires commitment

One person turns up in less than the wedding best available to him.

The invitation may be open, the guests may be mixed but you are in the presence of the holy creator who loves you with a passion. That passion, as in all relationships needs its response in the return of love and holiness.

When we love we respond with love and wholehearted commitment. That is the wedding suit required. The invitation may be open, there may be good and bad, but the invitation is about response to love. It is all about entering into love. We can refuse to do that.

Response to love is the response of a life lived as a kingdom life. That is, justice, peace, mercy, compassion, truthfulness dominate us and are our passions. We are as committed to them as God is committed to them. The garment is the garment of God's passion for love and justice.

The man is thrown out because his garments are those of violence. Unless he leaves them outside he has no place in the party celebrating peace and justice for all. That is called repentance.

Some will say, "Surely God loves us as we are." Indeed. God loves the lover of violence, the great hater and the malicious whisperer. But if they wear those clothes in the kingdom party they are saying that they have not changed. You either pick up God's agenda or you don't.

You will notice that the servants do not carry out the judgement. It belongs to God. The servants are invitation carriers: they are not judges. An invitation bearer is our role in the world.

The servants must look to their love relation with God. Be warned of the dire consequences of accepting the invitation and doing nothing but showing up. We can never be smug about others. We invite others: we pay attention to our relationship with God.

This is a parable of warning, not to the outsider, but to the insider. This parable is not describing the fate of outsiders for our benefit and enjoyment. It is warning, 'Take heed.' 'If you think you are standing, take heed lest you fall.'
