

“True Heaven”

In today’s readings we get multiple versions of what the Kingdom of Heaven might look like. The ones that resonate with me come in Isaiah and Psalm 23. Isaiah gives us the image of God as a refuge for the poor and needy in their distress. The Kingdom of Heavens the place where the shroud of death no longer hangs over all people. Where the “song of the ruthless is stilled.” Where feasting with rich food and well-aged wines is the norm. And poignantly, “the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces.”¹

Psalm 23 also gives us an idyllic image of God’s care for us as the sheep of his pasture where we are led to green grass and still waters that nourish us. We also feast at a table with our former enemies and our cup runs over with goodness, mercy and love.

Today’s readings ended with a parable that I have never liked. Another preacher wrote, “It is my least favorite parable in my least favorite gospel.”² There are several reasons for that. First, this parable is the climax of a series of increasingly violent and brutal parables. Matthew seems to have a penchant for violence that does not show up in other gospels. If he has a signature phrase it is, “banish him to the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”³

The main reason I am not fond of this parable is that it is so often treated as an allegory. The characters are interpreted as archetypes. As such, the king is God, the son/bridegroom is Jesus, the banquet is the heavenly banquet, the people who refuse to attend the banquet are the Jews, the people sent to gather them in are the prophets, the people brought into the banquet are the Gentiles who replace the Jews as the chosen people, and the unfortunate one who is thrown out is one who does not recognize the generosity of the invitation. It is all very neat, tidy and wrong.

Additionally, some have taken the parable to show that God is a wrathful father whose main job is punishing us for our sins. That is a false representation of the arc of the Biblical story in which God seeks a close and loving relationship with humanity. Also, the destruction that the king inflicts on the original invitees has been used as license to persecute Jews and people of other faiths who do not follow Jesus.

As we have discussed, Jesus’ parables are not fables with simple moral endings like Aesop’s fables. Neither are they allegories with a clear cast of characters thinly disguised and easily identified. Parables are not supposed to be easy. They are supposed to make us uncomfortable. Parables are supposed to help us understand how God’s Kingdom is different from the world in which we live.

Time and again the crowds and the disciples are confused by his parables. Remember the parable of the laborers in the vineyard three weeks ago where anyone who labored in the vineyard received the same payment regardless of the number of hours worked. Then two weeks ago there were sinners entering heaven ahead of the righteous priests and elders. Last week the righteous see they have been so intent on following the letter of the law that they have missed the spirit of the law.

Parables are supposed to “afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.” Over the centuries, the interpretation of this parable has become a comfort for the

¹ A theme that is revisited twice in The Revelation of John 7:17 and 21:4.

² David Lose, “Limited Vision” on the website In the Meantime... <https://www.davidlose.net/2020/10/pentecost-19-a-limited-vision/>

³ Matthew 22:13b

comfortable. These interpretations seem to be designed to help Christians feel good about themselves in spite of the many flaws that interpretation has. If we can free ourselves of those false interpretations, we may learn something truly profound about the Kingdom of Heaven compared to this world.

Jesus begins the parable by saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be **compared** to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.” Jesus does not say the kingdom of God is like this banquet. When we compare we don’t just look for how things are similar, we also look for contrasts. In this case everything about the situation is dissimilar from the Kingdom of Heaven.

To begin with, the king is not at all like God. He is a tyrant, who is easily offended, prone to anger and violent. John the Apostle wrote, “God is love.”⁴ This king is the polar opposite of God.

The people who received invitations are not disrespectful of the king out of selfishness. The king has not earned their respect. He relies on fear and brutality to keep them in line. Their excuses for not attending this party, are clear evidence that they do not respect the king and do not want to have anything to do with him.

The king, in his rage, has his servants strongarm people off the streets—strangers, the homeless, and travelers—and force them to attend a feast to which they were not originally invited. He orders them to make merry or be punished. That is not much of a party. To add to the absurdity of the situation, while the party goes on inside the palace, outside of the palace the king’s army is slaughtering those who refused to attend and burning down the city around them.

The one person who stands out at the party is the one who is not dressed for the wedding. He or she is the one who has the courage to show that this is not a real wedding celebration. This person’s presence is the signal that the Kingdom of Heaven is nothing like this. It is the one who is not dressed for the celebration who shows us there is hope. Like the prophets of old this guest speaks truth to power. By his example we see that we are called to stand up to the tyranny of this world. We are called to stand up to those who proclaim themselves godly, and use ridicule, force and fear to obtain and maintain power. We are called to stand up for those who have been forced to celebrate when their lives contain little worth celebrating. We are called to stand up and confront violence in the name of Jesus Christ, who was murdered by the power of the empire for preaching respect, love, and peace.

We are called to attend a different banquet. That banquet is the love feast at the table of God. It is the one that we hear of in Isaiah and Psalm 23. A banquet that reconciles the hurt, anger, and sorrow of this world. A banquet where friend and enemy come together to feast in love because we are all beloved of God. A banquet where we can say, “surely [God’s] goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives and we will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.”⁵

⁴ 1 John 4:8b

⁵ Psalm 23:6 Book of Common Prayer p 612