

“The King Who Was Not God”

I have never liked this parable. Another preacher wrote, “It is my least favorite parable in my least favorite gospel.”¹ There are several reasons for that. First it is the climax of a series of increasingly violent and brutal parables. Compared to parables in the other Gospels Matthew seems to have a penchant for violence. If he has a signature phrase it is, “banish him to the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”² This seems to be Matthew speaking rather than Jesus because it does not show up in any other gospel.

The other reason I am not fond of this parable is that it is so often treated as an allegory. Each character is an archetype that is easy to identify. As such, the king is God, the son/bridegroom is Jesus, the banquet is the heavenly banquet, the people invited to the banquet but do not come 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 an imposter, probably a Jew, who does not recognize the generosity of the invitation and does not dress properly. 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. 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.

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. Jesus’ parables offer us real world situations with a twist that is supposed to help us understand how the God’s Kingdom is different from the world in which we live. Time and again Jesus leaves the crowds, the disciples and us confused by his parables. We saw that three weeks ago where anyone who labored in the vineyard received the same payment regardless of the number of hours worked. 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.” That is what these last three parables have done. Over time this fourth parable has become a comfort for the comfortable. Let’s look at this parable with fresh eyes and through the appropriate lens instead of rose colored glasses.

¹ David Lose, “Limited Vision” on the website In the Meantime... <https://www.davidlose.net/2020/10/pentecost-19-a-limited-vision/>

² Matthew 22:13b

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 a banquet, but rather may be compared to it. When we compare we don’t just look for how things are similar, we also look for how they are dissimilar. 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 who is very violent. If, as John the Apostle wrote, “God is love,”³ then 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 respect. He relies on fear and brutality. Their thin excuses for not attending an otherwise wonderful celebration, are clear evidence of that. Who buys a field or oxen without inspecting them first?

The king, in his rage, has his servants strongarm people off the streets—strangers, the homeless, and travelers—into a feast to which they were not originally invited. He orders them to make merry or be punished. What kind of a party is that? To add to the absurdity of the situation, the king’s army is at the same time slaughtering those who refused to attend just outside the palace.

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 but a forced one. This person’s presence is the signal that the Kingdom of Heaven is nothing like this. To think that God’s Kingdom is anything like the kingdom of this petty tyrant is to be totally fooled and stuck in our own heads about what life is like. It is the one who is not dressed for the celebration who shows us there is hope. Like the prophets of old and the prophets of today 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 mutual respect, love, and peace.

We are called to attend and encourage others to attend a different banquet. That is the love feast at the table of God. It is the one that we hear of in Psalm 23. This is the banquet where we sit to celebrate with our friends and even with those who trouble us for we are all beloved of God. When we do so, when we recognize each other as beloved children of God, even in our differences, then “surely [God’s] goodness and mercy with follow us all the days of our lives and we will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.”⁴

³ 1 John 4:8b

⁴ Psalm 23:6 Book of Common Prayer p 612