



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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PENTECOST 20, OCTOBER 15, 2023

ISAIAH 25:1-9; PSALM 23; 1 PHILLIPIANS 4:1-9; MATTHEW 22:1-14

A METAPHOR FOR GOD



The Feast in the House of Levi, Paul Veronese

Matthew 22:1-14 *[Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again, he sent other slaves, saying, “Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.” But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, “The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.” Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. ‘But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” And he was speechless. Then the king said to*

the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." For many are called, but few are chosen.']

Violence is not a metaphor for God.

Yet, we just heard:

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who held a wedding banquet. The guests made light of the invitation and went away. Some seized the king's slaves and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city."

It is impossible to hear the reading of today's gospel without imagining the shocking violence in Israel and Palestine this week, starting with the horrific attacks by Hamas. Indiscriminate slaughter of innocent civilians and children, terror of those taken hostage, and retaliation of even greater killing of innocent civilians and children, as well as complete destruction of homes, houses of worship, schools, entire neighborhoods.

People all over the world are witnessing the brutality, fear, and trauma in the land of the Holy One. They are speechless with pain and grief. So many times this week, the only words that were possible were, *"Holy God, Holy and Mighty, Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us."*

And now we wonder, "Where is the good news in this gospel reading?"

The parable of the Great Dinner appears in two canonical gospels, Matthew and Luke, as well as the gospel of Thomas. In Luke and Thomas, it is a simple story of a man (not a king) who invites guests to a party. When his servants go to tell the guests that dinner is ready, they make excuses and won't come. So, the host directs his servants to go out into the streets and fields and bring in whomever they find so that the house is filled with dinner guests. The End.

Jesus offers this parable to his followers in the presence of the Pharisees, powerful religious leaders who feel threatened by Jesus' teachings. They guard their political power, watching Jesus carefully while plotting to discredit him.

Given that context, this parable of the great dinner is often interpreted as a message to those with earthly power that God's desire for humanity is not exclusion or even inclusion that must be earned. It is an expansive, all-encompassing invitation and embrace. All belong at the table of God.

And we *can* hear that theme in Matthew's version of the parable, our gospel today. The king does eventually extend an invitation to all people in the community and gathers them for the feast.

But if we intend to read this parable of the kingdom of heaven with the king representing God, then we are trapped in a disturbing vision of paradise. One that includes murdered servants, a burned city, and captive dinner guests who must make merry while one of their friends is thrown out into the cold. Through this lens, God becomes a vindictive autocrat and a relationship with God means fear, coercion, and arbitrary rejection.

But violence is not a metaphor for God.

One longstanding interpretation of this parable focuses on the community for whom Matthew writes his gospel. They are 1st century followers of the Way, reeling from Rome's destruction of Jerusalem and at odds with the larger religious community.

So, some read this parable allegorically, where the invited wedding guests are the chosen people of God. They reject God's covenantal invitation and are punished through the destruction of their city. The gospel invitation is then extended more broadly, now including Gentiles.

The man who is dressed improperly is one who has not clothed himself in Christ. Because he does not live as a true follower of Jesus, he is banished from the feast. Thus, this parable warns Matthew's community that those who reject Jesus' message or neglect their life of discipleship do so at their own peril.

I can see how this allegory might set up guard rails for a disoriented 1st century community, but it still casts God as petulant destroyer-in-chief.

The human impulse toward retribution is understandable.

Yet, God never desires violence.

We know this because Jesus teaches that no one is ever lost to God. God is like a shepherd who has 100 sheep but when one goes astray, he leaves the others and searches until he finds it. "Truly, I tell you," Jesus says, "the shepherd rejoices more over the one who is returned than the 99 who never went astray."

We know that God does not desire violence because Jesus shows us what it looks like to love and be loved by God, and how that love flows through a human life of relationship.

It looks like welcome and forgiveness and healing. It looks like grief over lives cut short

and comfort for those who mourn. It looks like integrity and truth-telling in the face of injustice, and solidarity with those who are rejected and marginalized.

Violence is not a metaphor for God. Peace is.

The peace of God that passes all understanding. The peace that guards our minds and hearts in the love and life of Christ. Peace that is not an absence of conflict but the saturating presence of justice and renewal.

So where is God in this parable? There's not much evidence of peace. When I imagine the full scene, the smoldering city, the dead and injured, the frightened guests, clearly God is not the king.

But God is there, picking through the rubble, binding up wounds and holding those who grieve. God goes with the servants to find the hungry and bring them to dinner. God is present in the wedding hall, calling out the cruelty of the king and sharing an extra robe with the guest who needs one. And God is moving through the outer darkness, finding

those who weep and shining a light to bring them home.

Where is God in the Land of the Holy One? Not with terrorists who kidnap and kill innocent civilians. Not at the wheel of a tank or behind a gun. Not at the table of vengeance and violence.

God gathers those who mourn – Jewish, Muslim, and Christian – and sits with those held hostage. God breathes for the mothers and fathers who carry their lifeless children in search of safety. God travels with the refugees and upholds the doctors and nurses who treat the flood of injured people. God strengthens the witnesses to communicate the horrible truth they see and challenge us to respond in the name of compassion and new life.

Violence is not a metaphor for God.

Peace and justice are.

Holy God, Holy and Mighty, Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us.

Amen.



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EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL