11th Oct 2020 – A Talk for Harvest by Chris Gates (Isaiah 25:1-9 Matt 22:1-14)

It’s another Harvest Festival.

Where we bring our fruit and vegetables

‘Cos we want to share the best of all

The good things that we’ve been given.

Those are the words to ‘The Harvest Samba’. It’s a song that may be familiar to you if you have children. My kids tend to sing it every year at the school harvest festival. In fact, it dawned on one of them earlier this week that they won’t be able to sing it this year and to tell you the truth, they were pretty devastated. There was much wailing and gnashing of teeth.

You might be surprised to learn that it wasn’t Connie that was bothered though...!

When I was thinking about this talk, I joked with my family that I would start with this song, but as I looked up the words, I realized that it does actually tie in pretty well with the reading.

You see, I read the scripture for this morning’s service and it dawned on me that it isn’t really about harvest. In the both readings, the word ‘banquet’ is there, but it’s probably occurred to you all that the food element is not really the point.

I’m not going to focus on asking for foodbank donations or money in this talk – Steve has done a really good job of telling you what is needed and how to do that. And it’s up to you what you decide you can or can’t afford or would like to give. But I hope looking at these 2 readings will give you pause for thought and help you make a descision.

Let’s have a look at the gospel reading as it takes some deciphering. It comes across as one parable – where one thing is represented by another, but it is actually thought of as two parables by theologians and cleverer people than myself.

1: The Parable of the Wedding Banquet

2: The Parable of the Wedding Garment

It/they come as part of a series of stories in answer to the questions posed by the chief priests and Pharisees starting a little bit earlier in Matthew’s gospel at 21:23.

They ask, “By what authority do you do these things?”

And so we are treated to the Parables of the two sons, the wicked tenants and then this one. Or two, depending on how we look at them.

Because, why would he give a straight answer. I love you Jesus, but I wish sometimes you would just say what you mean. Why didn’t he? Tradition – mimicking the teaching style of the time?

Was it because it made you think. You HAD to go away and think about it. But that could so easily have been misread. But as Jesus states, not to those with ears to hear. In this case, these were learned men, they would have been able to figure it out. When speaking to crowds, he told parables of agriculture and everyday life. Here he talks about banquets and robes. It’s almost a comedy of manners. Speaking into the Chief priests’ arrogance and grandeur.

But, back to the plot:

A King (God, in case you haven’t figured that out) sends out an invitation to His Son’s wedding banquet. (The son being Jesus and the banquet alluding to the feast we will share with Christ in Heaven)

Now, he actually sends out 2 invites. The first being a kind of ‘save the date’ or for those of you on facebook, one of those event invites, where it’s as simple as clicking a button to say you will attend.

The invited guests are the people of Israel, and the first servants he sends out are the Old Testament prophets. Some scholars believe that the second set of servants equate to something that hasn’t even happened at this point in history – the Christian apostles, later missionaries and even later, modern day evangelists – us, if you like. If we are brave enough to speak out for the Lord. And all are given short shrift.

You see, it’s really easy to say that we will attend an event sometime in the future – even easier if it is online and you don’t actually have to face the person you let down. But when it comes to the big day, you may have had a better offer, or life just gets in the way.

Notice that the reasons for turning the invite down are for ordinary things, the routine of daily life.

“One went off to his field, another to his business.” Not examples of debauchery and sin.

And then Jesus says this “The rest seized his servants, ill-treated them and killed them” That’s a bit harsh don’t you think. All for inviting them to a party!

But that is how the Hebrew prophets were treated. And the missionaries. And even modern-day evangelists – maybe they/we are not killed or beaten, but you only have to engage in an online debate and you will see the bile and the hate start to fly. Again, all for inviting people to a party. You would think they would WANT to come.

But sometimes, the actual event, the effort of getting ready and into your glad-rags and out of the house is just a bit inconvenient.

We would love to follow Jesus – the benefits sound amazing. In fact, it is the ultimate benefit! But when we hear phrases like, “Pick up your cross”, “Deny your father and Mother”, or “Give away all that you own”, it suddenly becomes less appealing.

So, back to the parable:

The king orders his servants to go to the streets and intersections – not to the temple and houses of important people and “invite to the banquet as many as you can find”.

As many as you can find. Everyone. Jews, Gentiles, rich, poor, the bad and the good – those we know and those we might normally cross the street to avoid. Although at least when we do that now it’s not because we are being rude.

Because the church is not just for those we like, those we feel would be a good fit. Those that are like us. It’s for everyone.

To go back to the Harvest song - ‘Cos we want to share the best of all, the good things that we’ve been given. The good NEWS that we’ve been given.

So, I ask you, are we an inclusive church? I am not being accusatory. I would like to think so, but only you (and God) know in your heart if you personally are inclusive. Remember though, inclusive is not the same as welcoming. We may welcome all, but do we accept them and include them? I suppose that depends on how you interpret the next part of the parable.

I was actually really glad when it became apparent that Jesus was making 2 separate points here. As Booting someone out of the party for not dressing correctly seems out of step with the whole inclusiveness message we’ve just looked at.

The King sees there is a man who didn’t have on wedding clothing. He says, “Friend, how did you come in here not wearing wedding clothing?”

Notice the word friend. Matthew has Jesus use the word 3 times in his Gospel, and every time he uses it ironically.

And then the King not only has him thrown out, but he has him bound, hand and foot!

If the banquet is paralleling Heaven here, I didn’t know there was a dress code!

Now you know, I do like to look smart, but wow, that’s quite a leap. As I have mentioned in previous talks I do miss doing church in my pajamas.

Do we interpret this literally? I know many would – It may be a basis for the tradition of ‘Sunday Best’.

But, again, many people, cleverer than I have interpreted these elusive wedding robes as righteousness. In Revelation 19:8 John writes that “Fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.”

This errant guest has declined to ‘put on Christ’ as Paul put it in Galations. He clearly has no intention of any observation of holiness. No growth in the spirit. Not truly living as a disciple of Christ. Simply turning up is not an option. Look at this through the lens of James’ letters that we have just finished. Head, heart and hands. Our faith must be shown through our actions.

Which takes us to our Old Testament reading from Isaiah. “You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in their distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat.” Poverty is mentioned over 300 times in the bible. Nearly 30 times we are instructed to look after widows and orphans – those shunned by society, who cannot earn their own keep. It’s almost as if we are being told to include everyone.

The next few verses from Isaiah are a picture of what God will do. “The Lord almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine – the best of meats and the finest of wines.”

The Lord almighty will do that. But we have to help. We are his stewards, we are Jesus’ hands and feet. We have to build this new heaven and earth in partnership with the creator.

I’m reading a book at bedtime with Connie. It’s by David Walliams – I’m sure most of you will have heard of him. It’s called ‘Bad Dad’. It’s really funny and enjoyable, but I do have issue with one thing. The 2 main characters are a Dad, Gilbert and his son Frank. Gilbert is in a major car accident and loses his leg. He then loses his job and his wife leaves him. The pair are in real dire straits. The book paints a very realistic picture of poverty. This is a situation I come across all too often at work, so I know it’s not an exaggeration. Gilbert goes without food so that his son can have the last half of the last tin of beans. Cold, because they can’t afford to heat them. Gilbert then borrows money from loan sharks just to survive and his debt spirals and leads him to do something desperate. I won’t spoil the rest in case you want to read it or the BBC have adapted it for Christmas telly this year.

But in the middle of this walks a new character – the local vicar. She steps into their hovel of a flat and what does she do? She turns her nose up at the disgusting cup of tea they have prepared for her re-using the last tea bag and she promptly invites them to church and then leaves!

Up until then I was really impressed with how Mr. Walliams had captured the tragic plight of this duo, but this was not how it would go.

That’s not MY church. That’s not “break my heart for what breaks yours”. A real vicar probably would invite them church, but it would be coupled with compassion and more importantly, action. We know that we, the church does more for the poor than this, but I wonder, is this how the world sees us? Huddling in leaky buildings, desperately trying to get our congregation size up? If it is, we must do more. We can’t do this quietly. I’m not saying we should shout about it for a pat on the back or to be proud of ourselves for it. We must show the world that we are trying to change the world. Through reaching out to our communities and offering them both practical help and the love of God.

Because we want to share the best of all

The good things that we’ve been given.

I’m going to close in prayer using the words in Isaiah V9:

“Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us.

This is the Lord, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation”

Lord help us to be your hands and feet on earth, bringing refuge for the poor and the good news of our salvation.

Amen