

Homily for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity

A sermon preached in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, at the High Mass on 22 October 2023 (The Twentieth Sunday after Trinity), by The Reverend Dr Peter Anthony, Vicar of All Saints' Margaret Street, London

EPHESIANS 5.15-21; ST. MATTHEW 22.1-14

“And he was speechless.” ST. MATTHEW 22.12

WHAT part of the story we have just heard as our gospel outrages you the most? Which bit seems to be the most unfair, the most surprising, the most inexplicable?

I would be prepared to bet a large sum of money that the part that outrages you wouldn't be the bit that outraged Jesus' hearers – those who first heard this story on His lips.

I suspect the bit of the story that most outrages and puzzles you is the portion at the end about the bloke who gets in without a wedding garment. It raises so many questions that offend our modern sensibilities, doesn't it. How could someone who is invited at the last minute be expected to come from the highways in a wedding outfit? Where is any sense of justice and fairness? Why is the King so cruel and vindictive?

For we live in a society where the rights and freedoms of the individual are clearly understood. We exalt the notion of the rule of law, and insist all should be treated equally by those who govern us. What happens to that poor man lacking a wedding garment grates against everything we hold to be just, and fair and decent and generous – in other words, everything we hold the Kingdom of God to be about.

But I don't think Jesus' audience in the first century will have felt the same about what they heard. I suspect they will have been outraged by a completely different part of the story.

For the inhabitants of first-century Palestine lived in a very different sort of society from ours. It was held together by a completely contrasting pattern of kinship bonds, tribal allegiance, social obligation, and imperial privilege.

Most will have assumed the King described in the story will have had considerable arbitrary power. It will have been his subjects' obligation to do as he willed. He honours his subjects by inviting them to the marriage banquet, and in refusing to come, they bring shame on themselves.

I suspect Jesus' hearers will have experienced astonishment and outrage at the idea that the King's subjects refused his invitation. It's an unconscionably egregious affront, and an astounding scandal. How dare they refuse the King, spurn his generosity, and renege on their obligations as loyal subjects.

If we're trying to make some sense of this parable, it might be worth using that first-century perspective to re-assess what's going on with the bloke with no wedding garment. For at the heart of this parable lies the notion of invitation.

An invitation is the first step in reaching out to someone, to making contact and initiating embrace of the other. It can be a way of expressing honour, and love, and compassion. An invitation can be a way of recognising someone usually overlooked; or placing at the centre of your focus someone normally at the margins. Invitations are about connection, gift, communication, friendship.

But there's something puzzling about the behaviour of that man with no wedding garment that I've always found odd. When the King speaks to him, how does he reply? We're told he was silent. He said nothing. He was speechless. The King tries to reach out to him, to connect with him. But all he does is close down the conversation. It's almost like on a TV police drama when a suspect in the interview room comes out with the words "no comment."

That man's silence undermines, inverts, and refuses the connection with him sought by the King. Maybe his crime is less a problem to do with his wedding garment, and more to do with his refusal to communicate, his spurning of the King's reaching out to him, his failure to recognise the gracious character of the King's invitation with hostile silence.

Our relationship with God is in some sense a life-long response to His invitation made to us in Jesus Christ. Perhaps it might be worth examining our lives this morning to think about the times when we respond to Him and to others with hostile silence. Not the silence of

prayerful attentiveness, but the silence that signifies us shutting down, closing off communication, reverting into ourselves: those times we can't be bothered to pray; when we are frosty with others; when we've run out of compassion for the world; or are running on low spiritual batteries; when we dig in our heels and just want God and His Church to go away.

When we have those spells – and all of us do – perhaps our gospel today might prompt us to try at least to say something to God. Even if it is just the honest prayer, that we're too tired or sick of Him, or can't think of much to say. Even if it is that we want to desire Him, but can't find much energy to do anything about it. Communicating with God honestly at least recognises His invitation to us; stonewalling Him with silence denies His presence and closes ourselves off from reality.

Just speaking honestly to God keeps a line of communication open that God can do something with. He can use your desire for Him more than you can possibly imagine. He can do more with your tired or despairing honesty than He can with your closed down silence, for in those moments He longs to invite you back into his embrace and clothe you with the wedding garment you lack.