

Introduction

Who here enjoys parties? Me too.

What do you enjoy most about parties?

I want you to imagine for a moment that you have planned a party, invited your friends, made all the preparations - and nobody turned up. - How would you feel? Why?

I remember on my fiftieth birthday I had a wonderful party. It was an all day party so people could come when they could and stay as long as they liked. I invited people from all parts of my life: my family, best friends, friends I knew as a teenager in the youth group, people I had known as a student nurse, friends from theological college. My godchildren and their parents and people from parishes I had worked in. It was an amazing mix of people, all who loved me and cared for me.

I ordered a bouncy castle and there was a video room for the teenagers. I baked for days and there was food and drink all day. It was simply wonderful.

But there was another party I remember when I was in my twenties. I had moved to Hampstead after a time away from central London and threw a house warming party for the friends I had known as a student - and nobody came! Well apart from my new boss and his wife. It was horrible! So embarrassing! I felt really foolish. I felt that nobody cared about me and wanted to share my joy at my new home. I felt the pity of those who had come. It was a long time before I threw another party!

In our reading this morning Jesus tells the story of a King who invited his subjects to his son's wedding. In those days, when time was less precise than it is now invitations were sent out and when everything was ready the guests were summoned. A bit like the 'save the date' notices we use on social media today. But despite the importance of the occasion the guests

Philippians 4: 1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

all made excuses, and worse still things got violent. The consequence was that the guest list was revised – everyone who could be found was invited. But there is a problem. One of the replacement guests, called in from the street at the last minute, was not properly dressed and was thrown out.

This parable has two meanings. Firstly it has a purely local meaning. The invited guests who refused to come when the time for the party arrived stand for the Jews who had long ago been invited by God to be his chosen people; yet when God's son came into the world, and they were invited to follow him they contemptuously refused. The result was that God's invitation went out direct to the highways and byways; and the people in the highways and the byways stand for the sinners and the Gentiles who never expected an invitation into the Kingdom.

According to the writer of the Gospel the consequences of the refusal were terrible. We are told the king sent his soldiers to kill the rebels and set fire to their city. This doesn't really fit in the context of a King dealing with a snub to his invitation to a wedding feast. But Matthew is writing sometime between AD 80 and 90. By then the Romans had destroyed Jerusalem. They had become tired of the arrogance and intransigence of the Jewish nation and had destroyed them. As he wrote Matthew must have felt this was a fitting punishment for the ungrateful unruly guests described in Jesus's parable. As he spoke Jesus was warning his Jewish listeners of the consequences of ignoring his invitation to follow him.

But the parable has much to teach us on a wider scale and applies to us.

It reminds us that the invitation which God extends us is to a feast as joyous as a wedding feast. His invitation is to joy. Sadly many people think of Christianity as a gloomy enslavement to rules and regulations, a striving to be good and a giving up of everything that gives pleasure and fulfilment. That mistakes the whole nature of following Jesus. The

invitation is to joy and it is joy that is missed if the invitation is refused.

It also reminds us that the things that make us deaf to Christ's invitation to us are not necessarily bad in themselves. One man went off to his estate the other to his business. They didn't go off on wild drunken adventures. They probably thought they were providing for their families and being responsible. But it is very easy for us to be so busy with the things of this life that we forget the things of eternity, to be so preoccupied with the things we see that are immediately before us that we forget the things that are unseen, to hear the claims of the world which block out the soft voice of Christ as he invites us to a relationship with him.

The tragedy of life is that it is so often the second best that shuts out the best, that it is the things that are good in themselves that shut out the wonderful. We can be so busy making a living that we fail to make a life. We can be so busy with the administration and organization of life that we forget life itself.

Equally the parable shows us that Jesus' point is not so much as to make us think how we will be punished if we refuse the invitation as to see what we will miss out if we don't go with him. Those who didn't come were punished – but the real tragedy was that they missed the joy of the wedding feast. If we refuse God's invitation to us some day our greater pain will not be in the things we suffer but in the realization of the things we have missed.

And finally the parable reminds us that God's invitation to us is one of grace.

The point of Jesus' story is that God has issued a wonderful invitation to us. At first it went out to God's chosen people, the Jewish nation, but many of them ignored it and went about their own interests. Then God widened the invitation to us all.

Philippians 4: 1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

Each one of us has been offered a place in God's kingdom, as one of his people to take part in the feast.

In the story Jesus told we read that one of the guests who was not properly dressed was thrown out of the celebration. On the face of it the judgement for that failure in manners is harsh because the man had simply come in off the street. Today we usually buy special outfits for our friends' weddings. In the society Jesus is talking about wedding guests would wear their best clean clothes. This man, when he received the invitation, rather than nipping home to change, has just wandered in as he is. The man is ejected because he will not change. He assumes he has no other obligation than to show up.

The image of new clothes is one used elsewhere in the Bible to describe the 'putting on of righteousness' when we become God's children. Everybody is invited to God's banquet but not everybody is necessarily righteous – or living rightly. The choice whether to change or not belongs to the invited guest and it is up to us whether we choose to or not.

In the early days of the Christian church, baptism involved removing clothes, being immersed in water and then dressed again to symbolize putting on a new life in Jesus Christ. These days we don't undress though many people are fully immersed in water but the message is the same; when we turn to Christ we become new people, we are transformed and we begin new lives. This is the invitation Jesus talks about to his followers.

I'd like you to think for a moment how knowing God in your life has changed you? Or if you don't yet know God in your life what changes you think you might have to make if you did? For many of us such changes may not be dramatic it might simply be a matter of realigning ourselves to consult God about how he wants us to live our lives.

If we accept Jesus's invitation to follow him we are no longer living alone. We have God's Holy Spirit to change us, to guide us in our decisions and to help us live the way God calls us to.

Philippians 4: 1-9

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We also belong to God's family the church, who support us and care for us.

People often think of being a Christian as a miserable way of life without much fun. But in fact God calls us to be joyful. We have so much to thank God for.