

Praise to you, O Christ. What?

It seems a funny thing to say after hearing a reading like this, doesn't it?

There are so many places in this reading that catch me, that pull at my attention, that distract me from whatever Jesus is trying to tell me as I read it. With this sumptuous wedding feast in the background we have the mistreatment and murder of servants, the vengeful destruction of the perpetrators and their city, the puzzling invitation to "everyone that can be found" (the good and the bad), the fate of this poor schmuck without a wedding robe, and finally the damning pronouncement that many are called but few are chosen. There is no doubt, this is a hard word we have received as gospel this week.

Where is the Jesus we know - full of compassion, love, mercy and forgiveness? Where is the Jesus who shows us the peace and provision of God? Where is the Jesus, friend of prostitutes and tax collectors, who speaks judgement not to the poor and downtrodden but to the rich and powerful? Where is Jesus here who heals the hurts of all? This is not the Jesus we know, but Jesus it is. How do we proceed then into our reading?

I believe two things are sitting at the forefront of this parable, at least as I hear it. The first is important for the community the gospel writer of Matthew was speaking to. This gospel was written around 80 C.E., about 10 years after the sack of Jerusalem (including the destruction of the Temple) by Rome. This was a cataclysmic event for the Jewish people, of whom Matthew and his community were apart, and it fundamentally shaped and shapes the Jewish faith to this day. Needless to say, violence and the destruction of a city was fresh in the minds of Matthew's audience.

The second thing is important to the story we know of Jesus. In chapter 22 we are suddenly aware of the temperature rising. Jesus has foretold his death and resurrection three times by now and he has arrived in the city where these things will take place. The nearness of his suffering is feeling very present as we hear this parable, and I imagine they were present to him. Can we blame him for the damning tone of this parable as he speaks to the people who will soon crucify him?

With these two things in mind, we take a closer look.

The parable seems to be in two parts. The whole back-and-forth concerning the invited guests and who eventually comes to the banquet could be considered the first part. If we consider the king to be God, the banquet as the kingdom of heaven, and Jesus the son, we might see the original guest list as the people of the promise, Abraham's children. The servants, especially those that were mistreated and killed, might then be considered the Prophets of ancient Israel. These prophets preached repentance after all. To a reluctant and "stiff-necked" people, they proclaimed the open and enthusiastic invitation of God to turn back and, in celebration, feast in the presence of God's complete pardon, love and forgiveness.

This is all over the old testament, the constant back-and-forth of God's chosen people obeying then breaking the law of Moses (worshipping idols, oppressing the poor, rampant injustice, etc. ), God's retributive justice, the people's repentance and the relationship, the covenant between God and God's people, restored. Then begin the cycle again. The newly invited, this crowd suddenly included in the celebration (everyone who could be found), might then be considered gentiles, the people (arguably) not originally included in God's covenant promise to Abraham. This is the movement after all of God that we hear in the book of Acts and Paul's letters, and even Jesus himself in some of our readings. Forgiveness, love and redemption is for all people, including the Jews but also the non-jewish world. In other words, us! This part of the parable reads as the ever expanding tent of our gracious God, inviting "everyone to be found" into the celebration of relationship with God who is love, mercy, abundance and welcome.

The analogy is not perfect. Indeed, it's all too easy to gloss over the uncomfortable parts of this parable for the sake of the "neat and tidy" meaning we might prefer. I don't know what to tell you about the destructive, ruthless and merciless appetite of this king. But perhaps that's ok. Life itself will never be as neat and tidy as we long for it to be. Why should scripture be any different? But glossing over these uncomfortable parts, not only of scripture but of our own lives and the very world we live in, renders the gospel hollow and lifeless. What good news there is to be found in scriptures such as these rings truer the closer we hold them to the broken pieces of our lives, the broken pieces and places of the world.

So we turn to the last part of this parable.

The king has filled his banquet hall with the good and the bad alike, people not-included on the original guest list. And it seems most of them have dressed up, though one poor fellow isn't dressed up enough - in other words, he doesn't look as he should. The king takes notice and confronts him. The man has nothing to say, he's not able or maybe interested in defending himself, and the king calls for him to be bound, "hand and foot and throw[n] into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Remember, Jesus is staring down his path toward the cross. Jesus is feeling the threat of that coming "outer darkness." He is beginning to look to the people not like a regular prophet, a simple disrupter calling for change, but the Messiah, the Anointed servant of God showing with razor sharp honesty the ruthlessness of the society we live in, and God's very power to overcome it.

**This man, bound hand and foot, thrown into the gaping jaws of death, is Jesus. And that, my friends, is Good News.** Who would we rather have out there waiting for us when the world turns upside down and goes ruthless on us than Jesus - the one who knows our weeping and our gnashing of teeth, the one who knows the isolation, fear and danger of the outer darkness, the one before whom death itself is defeated? For it is Jesus, the Messiah, God-incarnate, who will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; [who] will swallow up death forever. It is Jesus who will wipe away the tears from all faces. The disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth.

We know this outer darkness well. We know weeping and our teeth are worn down in the face of the shroud of Death we see everyday, all around us. The news every week in the death of our black and brown brothers and sisters, in the ongoing spread of this virus, in the growing and divisive heat of this election, and in all the small deaths of our own lives, this shroud threatens to overwhelm all light. This poor man, who doesn't look as he should, who receives no mercy from the powers that be is the one who will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. This is the feast of our Lord who crosses the threshold to join us in the dark, to be our light, our food, our strength, our hope. Lo, this [man, bound hand and foot, comes to us where we find ourselves, befriends and feeds us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited. Indeed, praise to you O Christ.

AMEN

Matthew 22:1-14

The temperature is rising - Jesus is pointing at chapter 26...

Jesus as the one thrown out of the banquet. How does this change the parable of the banquet?

John 3:16, shabby haircut, dirty white jeans ... He is Jesus.

Silent when confronted - a lamb goes uncomplaining forth.

Isaiah 25:1-9

Plans formed of old, faithful and sure - wonderful things.

The shroud and the ruthless

The ruthless, the destruction of the city

V.7-8 - the shroud that is cast over all peoples.

Contrast of feasts - Isaiah's feast is couched in care and salvation from the ruthless.

Psalms 23

Philippians 4:1-9

Verse 8. What does our gospel for today give us of this?

Verse 9. Learned, received, heard, seen - on the night...

7. Peace of God which surpasses all understanding...

What is God's answer to this ruthlessness?

In fact, if there were only two big events that came out of the first century and Jesus was one of them, the destruction of the Temple was the other. The reverberations of these two events have shaped the world these 2000 years.