

Bath Methodist Mission Area Worship 11th October 2020 Led by Greville Mills

Call to worship

Come, sinners, to the gospel feast;
let every soul be Jesus' guest.
You need not one be left behind,
for God has called all humankind.

Come, all you souls by sin oppressed,
you restless wanderers after rest,
you poor, and maimed, and sick, and blind,
in Christ a hearty welcome find.

Sent by my Lord, on you I call;
the invitation is to all.
Come, all the world and witness how
all things in Christ are ready now.

This is the time, no more delay!
This is the Lord's accepted day;
come in, this moment, at his call,
and live for him who died for all.

Opening Prayers

Loving and ever faithful God, we come once more to worship and adore you... for you are our God, our guide and our Saviour.

Let us feel your presence... as Spirit, guiding us, encouraging us, protecting and inspiring us to speak out for those less able. Fill us with your power to tell the 'good news' to those we meet...

Remind us of your Son, Jesus... Messiah and Saviour... divine being who came to earth in human form... who lived as one of us, mixed with good and bad alike, taught us and showed us what you're like; how we could live a better life together in your love... who loved us so much that he was prepared to die that we might have eternal life. Help us, as we wait for his return... as he promised.

And you are God, our heavenly father... you know each and every one of us... how we think and speak... our every thought... how we will respond to your love... help us to listen for you calling to us... reassuring us of your love. We see your generous provision for us all around; your bounteous giving and your unstinting ability to protect us.

You even forgive us, from ourselves when we get things wrong, sometimes unknowing but more often, deliberately... We are sorry for when we forget you... for when we deny you... for when we wrong others... so forgive us, and change us, for we ask it in Jesus' name.... Know that in his infinite mercy and with astounding grace, you are forgiven.... Thanks be to God. **Amen.**

Singing the Faith 481

The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want;
he makes me lie in pastures green,
he leads me by the still, still waters,
his goodness restores my soul.

*And I will trust in you alone,
and I will trust in you alone,
for your endless mercy follows me,
your goodness will lead me home.*

He guides my ways in righteousness,
and he anoints my head with oil;
and my cup — it overflows with joy,
I feast on his pure delights.

And though I walk the darkest path —
I will not fear the evil one,
for you are with me, and your rod and staff
are the comfort I need to know.

Stuart Townend (b. 1963) CCL167911

Readings: Isaiah 25:1-10a
Matthew 22:1-14 (ERV)

Sermon

What did you make of the Gospel reading today? I have to say I really struggled to understand it. I kept going back to that second verse “God’s kingdom is like a king who prepared a wedding feast for his son.” And yet all the things that the King did, didn’t match up to what I’d understood about what God was like. Maybe in the Old Testament, where God often got angry and smote people, but Jesus but was telling a different story about what God was like; and it wasn’t like this king...

Something doesn’t add up here, and you have to admit this seems to be one of Jesus’ more bizarre parables – nothing makes sense!

It started off like a similar story Jesus told about ‘the great dinner’ in Luke 14:15-24, but it soon begins to differ. In the reading today, it’s clear that something has gone badly wrong and there are extremes of behaviour by people on all sides, especially the King.

Why did the guests ignore and even shun the invitation to this sumptuous feast that had been prepared?

Why did those invited take it out on the servants bringing the message, and so violently? ‘Don’t shoot the messenger’ we’re told! Well they did this literally – well maybe not shoot them...

And why did the king act so harshly, murdering those who killed his servants, and setting fire to the city?

And then, from amongst all the ash, the banquet was still being served. Amazing? But this time to, well anyone who was left really.

All sorted! No, the King finds one of the guests improperly dressed... well with all the bloodletting and fires, was it any wonder; he didn’t have this in his diary, he wasn’t expecting to come; maybe his suit was at the cleaners!

Not good enough! The King has him turfed out into a dreadful place – that dark and unwelcome place where people are in pain and grind their teeth... the dentist’s waiting room? The outer darkness!

It doesn’t sound real does it? In fact, it’s absurd. But maybe that’s just what Matthew wanted to put across to those who would read his Gospel – it’s disturbing, it’s shocking and sensational; a plot that twists and turns at every verse; a bit like our red-top newspapers today... anything to grab attention. So, I turned to a few commentaries, and this is what I discovered.

Apparently, Matthew had a deeper purpose in writing this; remember his Gospel was written about 30 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. He was reflecting what was happening in Jewish society at the time... there was conflict within that community, not “Christians v Jews”, the antisemitism that followed, and still continues today in its various guises, but an internal conflict within Judaism.

There were those who considered themselves to be faithful Jews who had responded to God’s invitation to the kingdom banquet; the banquet, offered in honour of his Son, (Jesus, the Messiah). But others had rejected it by ignoring what the prophets had foretold, and the new missionaries (the disciples) who were speaking of this ‘good news’. Remember too that Paul was probably one of these who rejected this initial call... but after his conversion, changed sides.

Although written before the destruction of the temple (in 70 CE), a burning city would have been interpreted here as God’s judgment on those who rejected this ‘new thing’ he was doing. And this invitation; this amazing and unexpected invitation is to anyone and everyone, including Gentiles. Its main recipients are those once considered outsiders. This reversal of roles is a major theme of Matthew; remember a few weeks ago - ‘the last shall be first and the first shall be last’ (Matthew 20:16). You can begin to understand that to the purists within the faith, this was too much; the Jews were the ‘chosen race’. But this isn’t the end of the story; there’s a sting in the tail...

Whilst everyone’s having a great time, the king enters the banquet hall and moves among the guests. To his dismay, he finds that one of them isn’t dressed properly. “Friend,” he says, “how did you get in here without a wedding robe” (v12)? And, receiving no response, the King has him unceremoniously thrown out. Did he call him ‘Friend’?

It's thought that this part of the story is probably a device to ensure that any who are rescued don't become complacent. And there's a warning that although the doors of the kingdom are thrown wide open, and the invitation extended to anyone, once you come in, there are standards that need to be observed and if you're in, you've got to take part.

Matthew was using the analogy of the banquet to the kingdom of heaven. If you're invited, you've got to join in; you've got to put on your party frock and get with the beat. The kingdom music is playing, and it's time to get up on the dance floor. The problem with this guy is that he's not engaging; he's been invited to the party of the century, but he's a party-pooper; he's failing to join in. I wonder how many this applies to in the church today - how many are in the church but not joining in?

The theme of the banquet is also present in the passage we heard from Isaiah (25:6). Here the theme is to do with harmony, freedom and peace, as people from all races are brought together. This invitation is also open to all, not just the leaders or the chosen people, but 'all peoples', 'all nations', and reference to 'all' occurs five times in three verses!

On this occasion, the celebration is different, and you don't need to wear any special robes, (v7-8). It's a sumptuous banquet, (v6) of *'aged wine - the best of meats and the finest of wines.'* A complete change from earlier in Isaiah 24:7-9, where the wine had all dried up, along with mirth and joy.

Chapter 25 celebrates divine faithfulness. And it's not a new idea. Isaiah says (v1) *'Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done wonderful things, things planned long ago.'* And Isaiah says that God gives special attention to the poor and needy in v4 *"You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in their distress"*.

This bountiful God is hosting this universal banquet *"on this mountain"* (v6), on Mount Zion, where the temple stood. 'All peoples, all nations' coming together.

Victorious over that most persistent foe, *"he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth."* (v8).

This has been a plan long in gestation, coming to fruition. Doesn't this inspire hope that God does what he says he will do? A faithful God indeed.

This is a wonderful vision from Isaiah, but I wonder how far we are from it today...

This plan for harmony and peace, inspired by God's invitation, has been enshrined in various international movements over time. In 1776, the American declaration of Independence from Britain (signed 4th July) stated that: *"all men are created equal"*

At the time, these stirring words enabled Americans to believe that a life apart from the mother country, even though it threatened their sense of security, economic stability, and identity, would eventually unite them through the vision of a better life. As time went by, these original words were rewritten to accommodate the emancipation of women, in 1848 to *"all men and women are created equal."*

They were invoked at Gettysburg in 1863 by Abraham Lincoln shortly after he signed the proclamation to free slaves, and again a hundred years later by Martin Luther King, describing his dream that *"one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed, that all are created equal."*

Don't you get the feeling with all the attention focused on the Black Lives Matter movement, that this is still waiting to be fulfilled?

Following WW2, the United Nations, in 1948, set out its purpose with a Universal Declaration of Human Rights to establish *'a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations.'* It enshrined these rights in various Articles which still stand today, that (amongst other things)

(1) all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood, (2) Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status, and (3) that everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.'

It's interesting to note that despite these well-meaning and bold initiatives, the world pays little more than lip-service to its supposed ethical and moral intentions. There remains so much inequality in the world today, and many nations chose to ignore the 'rights' that don't suit the way they want to govern. The gap between the wealthy and poor nations is ever widening, especially as debt repayments continue to mount as poorer countries use their scarce resources to help the people fight the pandemic.

The inability to deal effectively with climate change is being hampered by the developed world's inability to stop doing and taking more than its fair share of the world's resources. Proxy wars between the major nations are creating a mass of displaced people looking for somewhere safe to live - asylum-seekers cross continents to seek a better life away from persecution and despotic leaders.

You would have to say, at this point in time, that the world seems in a frightful state with millions of people seeking a better life; a life free from persecution and injustice; a life of equality as seen in the light of the various active and vociferous protest groups. Black Lives Matter, I've mentioned, Hong Kong students, Muslims in China and Myanmar, LGBGTQ+ rights activists, Amnesty International protesting against political prisoners, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth fighting for climate change action and a better use of resources. And this isn't the full picture... this is the tip of the iceberg that we see; so much goes unreported by a press more restrained than ever by political and big business interests.

For me, the worst example of this is taking place right now in the very place where Isaiah saw this vision; God's invitation to the universal banquet was set on 'this mountain'. Jerusalem is the focus for the three mono-Theistic faiths: a place Holy for each, so you could say that Isaiah's vision has been accomplished. As such the International community established Jerusalem as a neutral city, available for all faiths to share. Unfortunately, this has been undermined by one group seeking exclusive rights and using all its powers to secure it. They ignore International law and continue to daily commit atrocities on civilians (including children) and deny the human rights of a large part of its own inhabitants. Many suffer, and it's been going on for over 70 years. The International community has failed to put this right, so in the meantime, peace and reconciliation are a long way from being achieved.

That vision of peace, where all people are invited to the sumptuous banquet: a vision a life of equality for all people; a place where all nations work together for a better universe seems a lifetime away, but it has not gone away, for God never gives up, and I would suggest that, for him, this is still 'work in progress'.

At this moment in time it's difficult to see how things will pan out. Here in our own country, we have become more polarised than at any time in living memory with people fixated, on the one hand, by staying safe from the Coronavirus and, on the other, that fast-approaching Brexit cliff-top. It's now, more than ever, that we need a steadying hand; someone we can trust to guide us through these choppy waters – this dark valley; a calming and steadfast influence. We need our Good Shepherd.

Amongst all the mayhem, the destruction, the breakdown of communications; in in the midst of the all the language of hurt and hatred, we have received the invitation to the feast. So, if we are to avoid becoming complacent, we need to be constantly pushing towards the dream/the vision of that place where there is universal peace, where all are equal. Lest we become like the man 'improperly dressed' at the banquet, we need to put on our party frocks, and get with the beat.

So, stand up; speak out; work for Christ, the bridegroom of the party. Shout out for freedom and equality; shout out against injustice; shout out against the disgrace of a country that treats immigrants and people of different ethnicity with a policy of a 'hostile environment'. And worse still, a country that puts every possible obstacle in the way of asylum-seekers, who have escaped from unimaginable horrors looking for a safe-haven. We know there is a better way; Jesus has shown us a better way to live. This is the way that God prefers, and remember,

"The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth. The Lord has spoken... For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain."

The party's started... and we're invited, so just get on in there and have the time of your life. Amen.

Singing the Faith 44

Come on and celebrate
his gift of love, we will celebrate
the Son of God who loved us
and gave us life.
We'll shout your praise, O King,
you give us joy nothing else can bring,
we'll give to you our offering
in celebration praise.

Come on and celebrate, celebrate,
celebrate and sing,
celebrate and sing to the King.
Come on and celebrate, celebrate,
celebrate and sing,
celebrate and sing to the King.

Patricia Morgan and Dave Bankhead

Prayers for others

Loving God we bring these prayers to you:-

For those we know and those we don't... and we know, Lord, there are myriad others known only to you.
For situations we understand and for those that confound us...
For places we've visited and those, where we don't really know where they are...
The news tells us of trauma and heartache across the world and we try to grasp the intensity of it all.
We pray for places where bad things are happening, but for which there is no news
Bless, O Lord, all involved in the hurting and the healing.

We hear of death and dying, of grieving and weeping...
We hear of pain, scarring and disfigurement...
We hear of anguish and confusion...
We hear of those in need of help, and those who struggle to find it...
We hear of the grieving and the sorrowful...
We hear of the lost and the alone...

Bless, O Lord, all involved in the hurting and the healing.

Lord, we pray for people in power with influence and authority... that they may rule with integrity and compassion...

This week is designated 'Prisons week' so we pray for prisoners everywhere... may they reflect on their wrongdoing. Ask for forgiveness of both the victim and you, Lord... and we remember all prisoners of conscience, freedom-fighters, who have done no wrong other than spoken out, or held up a banner in defiance, but nevertheless have been denied their freedom, maybe also tortured... give them hope for release... pray for their captors to show mercy...

Bless, O Lord, all involved in the hurting and the healing.

Lord, we pray for all the names and situations mentioned before... for our families... for those separated by the virus... or disagreement... for those in need of peace and reconciliation...

We pray for the things unsaid... for those painful things that only you know about...

Bless, O Lord, all our hurting and bring healing.

for we ask it in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

The Lord's prayer

Let us build a house where love can dwell
and all can safely live,
a place where saints and children tell
how hearts learn to forgive.

Built of hopes and dreams and visions,
rock of faith and vault of grace;
here the love of Christ shall end divisions:

*All are welcome, all are welcome,
all are welcome in this place.*

Let us build a house where prophets speak,
and words are strong and true,
where all God's children dare to seek
to dream God's reign anew.

Here the cross shall stand as witness
and as symbol of God's grace;
here as one we claim the faith of Jesus:

Let us build a house where love is found
in water, wine and wheat:

a banquet hall on holy ground
where peace and justice meet.

Here the love of God, through Jesus,
is revealed in time and space;
as we share in Christ the feast that frees us:

Let us build a house where hands will reach
beyond the wood and stone
to heal and strengthen, serve and teach,
and live the Word they've known.

Here the outcast and the stranger
bear the image of God's face;
let us bring an end to fear and danger:

Let us a build a house where all are named,
their songs and visions heard
and loved and treasured, taught and claimed
as words within the Word.

Built of tears and cries and laughter,
prayers of faith and songs of grace,
let this house proclaim from floor to rafter:

Marty Haugen (b. 1950)

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Blessing

May the blessing of God the father be on you and those that you love.

May the Spirit inspire and guide you in the ways of justice and peace.

And may you follow in Christ's footsteps to give an invitation to God's banquet prepared for all. Amen.