

The Kingdom of Heaven **Pentecost 17 – 9th October 2011**

Readings:

Matthew 22: 1-14 & Philippians 4: 1-9

Which of these two readings do you prefer?

Matthew's take on the kingdom of heaven?

OR Paul's letter of encouragement to a church community?

Well unless we are being particularly pious, we are all going to choose Paul's uplifting word to the Philippians. And this despite the obvious disharmony going on between two church leaders there. In fact this argument between Syntyche and Euodia may have been the very reason for Paul writing to the Philippians; inclusion and reconciliation seems to be an obsession with him, as with Jesus.

But maybe it because I'm masochistic, but I'd like this morning to look at the more uncomfortable of the readings. A double parable of judgement.

Now, there are a number of ways of looking at this parable. You can see it is as a warning to everyone about how God reacts if you cross him. Don't come to the banquet, carry on in our destructive way, then the king/God will destroy us. And there are many Christians who will accept that is how God behaves. They would say that God's very being demands that he punishes wrong.

But it's an explanation that is totally at odds with all we are told of God in both Old and New Testament. This is the God that repeatedly gives the Hebrew people a second chance. I could bore you all by going through the occasions of the faithful of God to a second, third, umpteenth chance to his people and in my own life. But let us content ourselves with looking at this morning's reading from Exodus. A people who, we are told, repeatedly turn their back on God, and yet are repeatedly given a second chance. Our God hates to see the mess his people make of their lives and that includes us today. And yet, what is it our Exodus reading says, "And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people." So much for the "vengeful" God of the Old Testament who repeatedly acts to save his people.

And in the New Testament, in this same Gospel of Matthew we have the same Jesus, advising us to love our enemies, turn the other cheek, and a God who repeatedly forgives the wrong calls his disciples make. A God who always seeks to reconcile rather than to judge and exclude. So what this kingdom parable mean?

Well I heard of another way of looking at the parable that says that the parable is part of a gospel written just after the destruction of the Temple and the expulsion of the Christians Jews in Palestine from the synagogues which were their spiritual homes of the early church. Matthew's community was devastated, and that's why the words of judgement are so strong

about those who reject the coming of the Messiah. If you hurt us our God will hurt you. No turning the other cheek for God!

And then the second parable - if you do join us and don't accept what we believe fully, if you turn up in the wrong clothes, then you too will be dealt with. You are either for us or against us. And there are some Christians who accept this very human understanding of what we have here in our Gospel.

This understanding of the parable is rooted in the pain and suffering of the small persecuted Matthean community. But is it about the kingdom of heaven?

So I'd like to offer a third understanding to stand alongside the other two. What do you understand by the kingdom of heaven?

For many it's equated with a place or an experience you go to or have when you die. Heaven, sometime in the sweet by and by. But I don't think that this is what Jesus meant by the term. Jesus would shout to all who would hear, the kingdom of heaven is now. It's here and now! And if that is the case then those invited guests that choose to ignore and even fight against the invitation bring about their own downfall in this world, here and now - not some damnation into eternity where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

The Kingdom of heaven has arrived and our lives will be greatly enhanced by accepting God's invitation.

Now the reason I would choose that interpretation over the others is because any other reading is so obviously at odds with what Jesus says in the early chapters of Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount. It's also at variance with the God we see in our two other readings for today.

And such a judging God was not Paul's understanding of how God works. Repeatedly he seeks reconciliation, as Christ did. I don't know what Euodia and Syntyche's problem was - but in terms of our parable it may have been that they had the wrong clothes on. Yet Paul urges his flock in Philippi to help them be reconciled.

I guess the point I'm making is that if the kingdom of God is now, surely it is incumbent for we who claim the name of Christ to do all in our power to bring about inclusion and reconciliation. That's the clothing worthy of wedding guests. Any other behaviour results in us excluding ourselves from the banquet.

Rev Tony Duncan
9th October 2011
pilgrim.tony@tassie.net.au