St Peter the Fisherman – Whitianga
Sunday October 15th

Theme: (Matthew 22 – the Wedding Banquet)

I runga i te ingoa o te papa, te tama, me te wairua tapu.

*In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*

*Amen*

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Well, we’ve been here before haven’t we. Hopefully we have been quicker to get Jesus’ message than the Jewish Leaders were, as for the third Sunday in a row, we have further warnings about how we are expected to live and behave if we hope to join Jesus in God’s kingdom.

We’ve heard the parable of the two sons – one of whom appeared to behave obediently but didn’t. The wicked tenants who treated the landowner’s slaves, and son, so horrifically, and now the King’s invitation to the wedding banquet for his Son. We know enough about these parables Jesus told to understand their underlying message.

In the risk of overdoing the repetition, here’s what I said two weeks ago.

*Pretending to be a follower of God doesn’t get someone one step closer to heaven. Claiming to be a Christian won’t get one letter of a name written in the book of life. It isn’t possible to fake our way into heaven. Jesus is again emphasising that a faith which does not result in behavioural change that lives out his message is not true faith.*

*The person who says “Yes!” but does “No!” is not going to make it. It doesn’t matter to God* ***when*** *we got it and truly behaved as God asks, it just matters that before we are called, we did. Given that we don’t know* ***when*** *that will be, it’s probably a good idea to make sure we are already living and behaving as God expects.*

(The Wedding Banquet)

This wedding party began as convention dictates. A first invitation (a sort of “Save the date!” notice that has become common again) is followed by the summons carried by the king’s servants when the banquet is ready. Then things start to fall apart.

I can’t imagine being invited to a wedding of this level of importance and not going.

(Empty table)

But here, the invited guests simply refuse to come, and when the second call comes, they treat the invitation as a joke and go about their business. More than bad manners are at stake, because some invitees even assault and kill the King’s servants. In his anger the king then escalates the confrontation by sending in his troops to destroy both the perpetrators and their city. A pretty harsh response, but intentionally so, as far as Jesus’ intention of getting his message through, was concerned.

With the party ready, the king is determined that it will go forward, and so the servants are sent out again. They are to bring in everyone, “good and bad” so that the hall will be filled. When the king plans a party, the party will go on! The parable is clearly introduced as an illustration of God’s open call to the “kingdom of heaven.”

(Banquet hall filled)

The use of “king” is a common metaphor Jesus used for God, and the wedding is a metaphor for the relationship between God and his people – which of course includes us, all these thousands of years forward in time. The final invitation that will fill the banquet hall is inclusive in the extreme. In that sense it mirrors other instances of Jesus’ table community that embodied the hospitality and inclusiveness of the divine empire he proclaimed. Questions of social status or even one’s ethical behaviour are set aside. As I say most weeks, ‘All are welcome at Christ’s table’.

However, there is a catch!

This seems to be one of the harsher and, perhaps, on first reading, more illogical parables in the Gospel of Matthew. He seems to turn up the volume on the violence and tacks on the troubling addition of the last-minute guest kicked out of the party for wearing the wrong outfit.

(Wedding guest removed)

This parable comes roaring in as the last of a set of three, strung together as an extended response to the temple leaders’ question about Jesus’ authority. As with the previous two parables (The Two Sons, and The Wicked Tenants), Matthew engages in allegorical work. While the initial invitation to a wedding feast might feel realistic (or at least possible) to early receivers of this text, the parable quickly takes a turn into the fantastical where slaves are killed for extending invitations the king burns his whole city down, and an unsuspecting guest is thrown out of the party for poor clothing choices.

We can see that the first set of slaves represent the prophets that called the Israelites (invited guests) to the banquet. The violence done to the slaves represents Israel’s rejection of the prophets and the king’s violent response might be interpreted as the fall of Jerusalem. The second set of slaves sent out to extend invitations to “both the good and bad” are thought to represent the Christian prophetic missionaries. And, finally, the guest rejected for not wearing the right garments represents one who has not actually “put on” the Christian life.

The harshness of this parable may be off-putting to us, the present-day faithful who prefer our Jesus to be gentle, meek, and mild. However, there is something about the violence and intensity of this parable that shakes us up and may remind us that we are participating in not just our personal or even communal stories, but also in God’s story. What we do as people of faith **matters**. It is so easy in these increasingly pressured days for people to compartmentalise all the pieces of their life, particularly their faith life. They check “going to church” off the to-do list and may view their faith as one small aspect among many of their lives. The intensity of this parable and harsh consequences of refused invitations reminds us that living out our faith is a matter of urgency and importance. In other words, attending to our faith lives, our relationship with God, and our communities has implications for our future acceptance into God’s kingdom.

 Matthew invites us to the world of allegory where one image means something else. Here the “wedding garment” symbolizes the Christian life that we “put on.” This language is used elsewhere in the New Testament where the people are told, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ, have clothed yourselves with Christ”.

(clothed with Christ)

Also, “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” In other words, there is an expectation that being a Christian, a Jesus-follower, will make a difference and be obvious in the way we live our lives. This parable, through metaphors and life-and-death consequences, insists that we, like Matthew’s community, need to live lives that do not just prioritize our faith, but reflect our faith to those around us so we are **seen** as appropriate attendees at God’s banquet.

Yes, it is reflected in our commitment to prioritise time for worshipping together. Yes, it is reflected in our willingness to go without, in order to help others less fortunate than ourselves. Yes it is reflected in the way we are willing to be ‘good neighbours’ in this small rural community. God can always see how we are doing in clothing ourselves with Christ.

 Finally, this parable reminds us of God’s broad, persistent, and generous invitation. God the king does not desire to party alone. Instead, he keeps extending invitations to everyone around so that the wedding feast will be a rich array of people from every corner of his world. Just do not try to sneak in not clothed in the expected array of true Christian life – namely bearing compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

Amen.