

**Sermon preached by Revd Rosemary Lain-Priestley on 9 October 2005**

**Title: It matters what we do with God's love**

**05 Trinity 20**

**Readings: Philippians 4. 1-9; Matthew 22. 1-14**

*For many are called, but few are chosen.*

Matthew 22:14

I recently spoke in another context as well as here about Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman who wanted him to heal her daughter. It's the one where he responds by saying that he can't throw the children's bread to the dogs – but the woman challenges him and he changes his mind and heals the girl.

I received a letter afterwards from someone who assumed that I didn't understand the linguistic niceties of the passage in Greek. Jesus didn't actually say 'dogs', he used the diminutive and fond term, 'little dogs'. The tone of the conversation was intellectually challenging rather than emotionally charged. It was all about Jesus' jurisdiction. The woman would have fully understood his reluctance to extend it. There was no heat or anger in her response to his refusal to heal her child.

I understand the 'dogs/little dogs' argument but I reserve the right to think that the woman was pretty angry, on no better or worse grounds than that I know I would have been. Our gut reaction to scripture has value. It's part of what we bring to our encounter with God's story as it has been revealed to others. Awareness of the historical and social background of the text and its linguistic clues are important as well – but they don't eliminate the significance of our own human response.

So, to this morning's Gospel reading. A wedding banquet is prepared and the king's slaves go forth to bring in the guests. They don't come. The next set of slaves goes out and they explain what a wonderful party it's going to be. Some of the guests make feeble excuses – the others, inexplicably, turn on the slaves and kill them. Their ingratitude has severe consequences – they and their city are destroyed.

The king concludes that the original guests were not worthy of his invitation, and instructs his slaves to bring in anyone they can find. It's an uncomfortable image – the son's wedding full of people the happy couple don't know from Adam – but it does have about it the sense of the wonderful gratuitousness of God's love. We don't have to have done anything to deserve to be called to God's banquet.

But just as we're warming to this picture the sledgehammer falls. A guest is discovered without a wedding robe. The surprise, for most of us, is that any of them were correctly dressed, considering the last minute invitation. But apparently they all were except one. Who, for his sartorial neglect, is bound hand and foot and thrown into outer darkness. *For many are called, but few are chosen.*

God's love is generous – more generous than we can ever conceive. But that doesn't mean it's okay to take it for granted. Once we have heard the invitation clearly, once we know that we

are being called to a place of unparalleled opportunity and embrace, it matters how we respond. Whether we take up or reject God's invitation our decision will have consequences. If we reject it we undoubtedly choose a diminished and impoverished way of being. But woe betide us if we accept the invitation lightly. It matters what we do with God's love.

And I almost want to stop there. Because who am I to suggest what this might mean for anyone else's life? I'm barely able to comprehend what it might mean for my own. But there is perhaps something to be said about St Paul's conversation with the Philippians which relates to this whole idea that it is possible to abuse God's love and that the consequences of doing so might be deeply damaging to ourselves and – though the parable of the wedding feast doesn't take the image this far – damaging to others too.

*'I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the Gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life'.*

Throughout his letter to the Philippians Paul urges the Christian believers there to cultivate in themselves and their community the 'mind of Christ'. The Christ who emptied himself, gave of himself fully for others even to death.

So, in chapter 4, he tells the leaders of the community to resolved any differences that they have in order that God's peace might prevail for them and amongst the Christian community. And he sets out that wonderful manifesto for Godly living, 'Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you'.

It matters what we do with God's love, because what we do with it shapes the world in which we live. We might think that our influence on that world is minimal – that what we do and say has very limited reverberations – that whether we turn up to the wedding feast dressed well or dressed badly is irrelevant.

But actually our days are made up of a myriad decisions about whether or not we choose to notice other people, how we nurture or damage those we are given to care for, what we do to the creation with which we interact, how we pray about the complex issues of violence and broken community that pervade the TV and radio news, how we contribute to the life of the place where we live, whether or not we smile at the woman we buy our newspaper from, or the stranger who walks into our church. It all matters. And some of the smallest things that matter make the biggest difference to other people.

Euodia and Syntyche needed to get their act together, because too much of their energy was going on internal strife and their personal disagreements were distracting the community from the peace which surpasses all understanding. 'Let your gentleness be known to everyone' says Paul, 'for the Lord is near ... Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me'.

God invites us to the banquet. The invitation is always there. No-one is excluded. All are equal in the kingdom. But the consequences of turning up are profound. What is demanded of us is that we shed our old garments and are re-clothed. Gone are the cynicism and hopelessness which say that we can make no difference to the party - in Christ we take on the responsibility

to consistently nurture gentleness, truth and excellence in ourselves and others. To resolve our human differences for the sake of building community. To grapple with all that life throws at us in the belief that the God of peace calls us, and that it matters how we respond to that call.