

28th Sunday Year A

Matthew 22.1-14

Fr Peter Groves

Mary Mags 11.10.20 (start of the academic year: Covid)

The significance of its two universities to the life of our city means that this is always an important time of year. Strange and bewildering for many, but also new and exciting, both for those arriving and those who welcome them. It's a time of mixed emotions. It's common to find something more than a little bit daunting, but intriguing and stimulating at the same time. I well recall being extremely nervous about almost everything when I began my undergraduate life, but I also recall enjoying it.

This year, the nervousness is spread rather more widely around. Throwing tens of thousands of people together for the first time in a relatively small city is not the ideal pattern of behaviour needed to control a

pandemic. Four of my students at Worcester are already locked down for a fortnight. There will doubtless be more restrictions to come, and any of us could find ourselves in isolation at quite short notice. While evidence from Oxford and elsewhere suggests that the touching ability of students to believe in their own invincibility has not abated, many people are avoiding city centres, public transport, and gatherings of all sorts including churches.

One thing that we can be sure will not be taking place this weekend is the enormous wedding party described in the gospel. Indeed, in Oxford at present the opportunity for feasting – matrimonial or collegiate – has been replaced by a good opportunity to lose some weight. But it's not so much the feast as the invitees which the gospel reading dwells upon, and the question of who is in or out, who should or shouldn't be here, is always live at this time of year. Most students spend at least some time irrationally worrying that they have only been admitted by mistake and that,

while everyone else belongs here, they themselves are something of a fraud.

That anxiety might be shared by those admitted to the wedding feast Jesus describes, because they have indeed been invited as a kind of mistake. Those to whom the invitations were originally sent have failed to respond as expected. That failure is rather more than a lack of social decorum. They refuse not once, but twice. They are described with a neatly chosen Greek verb which identifies them as those who have already been chosen, or we might say elected, sometime in the past, but are now failing to act upon the status they have been given. Not only failing to act upon it, but in the case of some, rejecting it with extremes of violent anger, turning upon and abusing those who have been sent to summon them to the feast. One simple interpretation of this parable is of course allegorical: the chosen are the people of God, the nation of Israel and its leaders especially, who fail to respond to being summoned into God's Kingdom by the person of his son.

But if we go with this reading, and smugly identify ourselves with those now on the inside, we are saying some disconcerting things. Claiming that we are the guests at the feast which inaugurates the kingdom, is saying that we are the ones who have been dragged in from the hedgerows and the byways, the dregs of society who are the host's last resort, when the respectable original invitees fail to turn up. Most of us here this morning don't fit easily into such a category – we are far too socially respectable, and that ought to give us pause.

And then there is the appendix to the parable, in which we find the alarming description of the guest without a wedding garment. Not being properly dressed, he is ejected from the feast. This detail is even less to our comfort. Not only is being invited not enough in itself – those who were invited turn out to be the worst offenders – but actually making it inside God's banqueting hall is not enough either, because there is still plenty of opportunity, it seems, to come up

short and to be excluded from the fellowship of the Kingdom.

There are various theories about the chap without the wedding garment, though attempts to literalise it and identify it with the clothing worn by those about to be baptised seem to me rather forced. In Revelation we find a fine linen garment being a sign of the righteous deeds of the saints, and no doubt Matthew does intend some sort of eschatological symbolism, perhaps in keeping with the images we find of the angels who announce the resurrection of Jesus, or the insistence of Jesus himself that the saints will shine like the sun. Interesting as these theories are, they are not of first importance to us. What is of first importance is the insistence that it's not enough to be on the inside.

The worry we might feel at this news could work in our favour. We all have a tendency to self-satisfaction, and we know the dangers of coupling that with the much more positive tendency to wish to belong. Joining with others, building relationships,

friendships, common interests, is one of the most rewarding parts of being human. But it can too easily be attacked by the undermining voices of selfishness, and all too quickly of suspicion and fear. One of the nice things about arriving in Oxford as an undergraduate is reconnecting with those you met when you came on interview. You can greet one another in the happy knowledge that you are no longer in competition, you have both “got in”. But “getting in” is something now completed, and ahead of you are seemingly endless opportunities and excitements, and if you sit back thinking that now you are “in” nothing more is required, you won’t last very long.

So it is with belonging, with being on the inside. Identifying myself with a group can too quickly become defining myself against another group – social, ethnic, religious. And for the Christian, such a self-definition can never be enough, because the love I am required to show for my neighbour is in fact the definition of what a Christian identity must mean. By this will everyone

know that you are my disciples, that you have love one for another.

To follow Christ is more than an individual relationship, it is to become part of something much larger than ourselves. But if the belonging is all that there is, if being on the inside is all that matters, then following Christ ceases to be following Christ, because we will not actually be concerned to move, we will be much more determined to stay where we are and enjoy the benefits of the feast to which we have been called. If we are to follow, then we have to move forward. The invitation we have received is an invitation to share the presence of Christ. But as Christ moves ever further towards Jerusalem, towards the cross and the empty tomb, then responding to that invitation means always moving onwards if we wish to partake of the feast.

What is that feast? It is, as Matthew shows us, both a call to live with God in eternity and also an invitation

to join everyone else, all who were dragged into the presence of the King himself. It is an invitation to live with God in the here and now, in the present of our lives, which is also always eternal. It is both present and eternal because the feast to which we are invited is the sacrament of Christ's presence in which time and eternity meet, by which the heavenly banquet and our earthly existence become one and the same. And it is the feast to which all are invited. All. Not just you, not just me. There is a reason why we call the mass Holy Communion.