

Sunday 11th October 2020

Revd Alan F. Miller

Opening words

The Lord is good!

God's steadfast love endures forever.

Prayer

Ever-present God,

you never leave us.

Help us to stay with you when we are tempted to flee,

and keep us seeking after that which is true,

that all may know that you are the Lord, our God,

a tenacious presence in whatever our reality.

Through Christ, our Lord. **Amen.**

Psalm 106: 1-5

¹Praise the LORD! O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.

²Who can utter the mighty doings of the LORD, or declare all his praise?

³Happy are those who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times.

⁴Remember me, O LORD, when you show favour to your people; help me when you deliver them;

⁵that I may see the prosperity of your chosen ones, that I may rejoice in the gladness of your nation, that I may glory in your heritage.

Hymn CH4 201 Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness

Prayer of confession

We and our ancestors have sinned.

Our ancestors exchanged the glory of God
for the image of a golden calf.

They forgot God, their Savior,
who had done great things in Egypt.

While our means are different,
our compulsions are the same.

Let us confess our brokenness,
for God is merciful and just
and will forgive us our sin.

**Holy God, you are the Lord our God,
who brought us out of the land of Egypt,
out of the house of slavery.
And yet our trust in you is fragile,**

easily crushed by our bent toward indifference—
the dismissal of your faithfulness
as a result of our forgetfulness.
Our trust is fragile,
easily broken by the slightest pause—
an answer to prayer not instantly given,
a request for peace not immediately felt.
Our trust is fragile,
easily displaced by gods of our own making—
the god of self-sufficiency, chased at any cost,
the god of illusion, pursued in any form.
Lord, have mercy on us,
through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Beloved, hear the good news:
Jesus Christ came
to stand in the breach
to reconcile us to God.
We are forgiven and freed!

Matthew 22:1-14

22Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ²“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’ ⁵But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. ⁷The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ ¹⁰Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. ¹¹“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹²and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. ¹³Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ¹⁴For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Reflection

Holy Spirit of God,
shine your light upon this Word
and into our hearts
that we may be enlightened
with fresh understanding. **Amen.**

There is nothing quite like the feeling of disappointment we feel when we invite people to a party and they don't turn up: we spend the whole day, maybe the whole week, getting ready and looking forward to welcoming friends to our celebration, buying food, preparing drinks, decorating the hall and then getting ourselves all dressed up and ready to go...we will be looking forward to having a good time, a time of celebration and laughter maybe with dancing or party games to add to the fun – think of all that hard work, all the effort and all the anticipation and expectation, and then think how you would feel if you had gone through all that only for no-one to come: think how you'd feel if friend after friend rang up to make their excuses, how you'd feel if some of those you invited didn't even bother to reply – think about how disappointed you'd be, and then you'll understand a little about the story that Jesus told about the wedding banquet.

Weddings were big events – as they are today, but lasting for even longer Jewish weddings that Jesus would have known could last for days – remember that the wedding celebrations at Cana went on for so long that the wine ran out! The father of the groom would want to celebrate his son's wedding in real style, showing off both how rich he was and how generous he could be to his friends; he would invite all his relatives, he would invite all his business associates, he would invite his neighbours and his friends, practically the whole village would be asked along to the wedding party – just as still happens in other parts of the world today, in India or in Africa. A wedding was a time of great happiness and rejoicing.

These words of promise and of hope would have been remembered by the Jews from generation to generation, through all their times of exile and hardship and persecution: there remained in front of them the vision of the kingdom of heaven as a place and a time of rejoicing and celebration, a great banquet, a feast to which God had invited them all. When Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven was like a wedding banquet, he must have had Isaiah's words in mind. God invited the Jews, his chosen people, into the kingdom by sending his son Jesus into the world as the Messiah, to teach them about true faith.

The trouble was, however, that the Jews did not believe that Jesus was the Son of God, they didn't accept him as the Messiah: instead, they rejected him, refused to listen to his message, and then persecuted his followers and disciples while Jesus himself was put to death on the cross. God's chosen people, who were invited first, threw the invitation to the banquet back in God's face – they were too wrapped up in their own affairs, too preoccupied with their own worries, to come; some of them even abused God's servants, even killing them.

If you can imagine the disappointment you would feel if this happened to you, if no one came to your party, then you might have some idea of how God must feel when we don't respond to his invitation.

For this is the wonderful truth, that when the first guests invited were too busy with other things to come, then God extended the invitation instead to everybody else, anybody who could be found to accept the summons to join the feast and share in the celebration: when the Jewish people rejected God's call to faith in Jesus, then all the rest of the world was invited to take their place and to sit at table in the kingdom of heaven. That is, through faith in Jesus as the Son of God who died for us on the cross, who died that our sins might be forgiven, through faith we have received God's invitation to follow his Son Jesus into the kingdom of heaven and into eternal life in the presence of God, a life of joy happiness and fulfillment.

It is important to understand that we ourselves have done nothing to deserve this invitation: nothing we have done or could do, nothing we have said or could say could earn us a place at the feast – the gift of life in the kingdom of heaven is a gift offered by the grace of God alone, a gift which reflects God's loving, generous and open-hearted nature.

But there is a catch – a condition which we must keep if we are to be allowed to remain at the banquet – by accepting the honour of a place at the banquet we also accept the obligation to accept the grace to be renewed and transformed by a life lived in imitation of Christ and inspired by the Holy Spirit. We cannot take up the invitation into God's kingdom if we are not prepared to change ourselves – once we accept the truth of Christianity, once we believe the Jesus is Son of God, Lord and Saviour, we cannot live the way we lived before, we cannot keep our former outlook, attitudes and behaviour. If we accept the invitation to faith, the invitation to life in Christ, then our lives must change to reflect that faith. If we do not change, if we are not sorry for our wrongdoing, if we do not regret our sin, if we do not strive always to do what we know to be right and good, then we are indeed like the wedding guest who came to the party but refused to put on his new clothes, turning up instead in the tattered and ragged clothes that belong to a previous and different life. If we do not make the effort to live our lives as we should, as God intends, then we are just like those who refused the wedding invitation in the first place, and will not be made welcome.

We are all invited to God's wedding banquet; and in accepting we must allow the rags of our old life to be exchanged for the freely given robes of holiness and right living. Christian faith is an invitation from God to share in celebration and joy: and the Churches fail in their mission if they do not reflect that greatest truth: it is quite wrong to think of Christianity as a religion of doom and gloom which requires us to give up everything we enjoy. Faith should bring laughter, happiness and celebration. The parable of the wedding banquet speaks of how Christians may share in joy with God at all times – we can all count ourselves among the guests who have been invited to join him – but whether we accept the invitation and go – that is a matter for ourselves to decide.

Prayers of Intercession

Loving God,
you never abandon your children;
your steadfast love endures forever,
your faithfulness throughout the generations.

We pray for those in our world whose trust has been broken
through exploitation by people in power
or abuse by those in intimate circles.

We pray for those whose trust has been broken
through abandonment by those who promised to stay
or manipulation by those who refuse to let go.

We pray for those whose trust has been broken
through cold comfort in times of affliction
or callous rebukes of those on the margins.

We pray for those whose trust has been broken
through the trauma of war
or the chaos of assault.
Empower us, your body,
to enfold and protect those broken in body, mind, or spirit,
through your all-embracing grace. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn CH4 396 – “And can it be that I should gain”

Benediction