

## Trinity XX

*“the wedding was furnished with guests”* (Gospel).

We naturally want to study Jesus, but we can only do so through the evangelists, and in this case Matthew. Here, on the face of it, is a story told by Jesus. If you study critical commentaries, you find that the latter part (the wedding garment) was added by Matthew. Now I have never been confident of such reconstructions, which seem to depend on the assumption that all original storytellers are brilliant and all those who try to “improve” the story are utterly incompetent. It is no part of our belief that Jesus was a brilliant storyteller, any more than that he would have been an Olympic athlete (had he been allowed to compete). Jesus was not making a professional living out of stories, he was telling them for purpose, and that very purpose might well make them less good as mere stories. Nor do I agree with another orthodoxy of my studies, that a parable must only make one point and that Jesus can never have used allegory. These are mere scholarly prejudices.

So we take the Gospel reading as we find it, recognising only the obvious truths that, from what we know about Matthew's treatment of Mark, he probably shortened the text and so might have cut out some clues to meaning which we would welcome. Both main points – the invitation of the poor and yet that “few are chosen” – and also many incidental details are topics congenial to Matthew, but that does not make the whole story spurious. It is easy to be too suspicious.

Jesus does seem to have believed himself sent “to preach the gospel to the poor” (Isaiah 61.1, taken up several times in the Gospels). Does that mean he has nothing to do with the rest? This is a concerning matter for us. We may not regard ourselves as very rich, but can hardly call ourselves poor materially (which is clearly the point in this story; whatever “poor in spirit” may mean, this story deals in those who are poor in material terms).

There is a possible trap, which lies in the way Hebrew (and Aramaic) work as languages. They are not good at nuances. Both in his words and in his life, for Jesus to concentrate on the poor is not a rejection of everybody else. We know he had rich supporters and did not simply turn away rich enquirers. This is true, but we may well still feel uncomfortable. It is a sad truth that all versions of Christianity in this country, even the Salvation Army, tend to find their membership at least a little above the very poorest. We acknowledge duties to the poor, and we do well, but how well would we welcome them? (Compare James 2.1-9.) A proper concern, but we should not lose sight of the point that this is a story of good news – there is a feast and a welcoming – it wasn't that the rich were turned away, they could not be bothered to come. There is a promise and we are not excluded, we merely have to accept the promise on God's terms.

But there is a warning. If we compare the story with Luke's version, Matthew includes the point that the rich do not merely neglect, they actively reject the message and are punished (verses 6-7). I do not think this teaching was invented after the destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus says something very similar in Mark 12.1-9 (a story also in both Matthew and Luke) so even if this aspect of the story is not genuine here (and it does somewhat delay the feast!) it is still very likely to be authentic teaching. Not necessarily that this is what will happen, but that the need for repentance is urgent, now is a time of danger for the complacent.

And so we come to the second warning, the wedding garment. The early church assumed this was allegory and that the meaning was, with whatever variation of detail, the necessity of baptism. This is not quite impossible, for Jesus does seem to have valued, probably even encouraged, John the Baptist's ministry of baptism (again seemingly welcoming the poor and morally dubious). But it is unlikely, and probably we should seek a simpler meaning. Of course the rich know what to wear and have the appropriate clothes for a grand occasion – but they would not come. Perhaps the story has been shortened, and the rather obvious step that the poor needed to be given and were accordingly offered proper clothes has fallen out (or is only hinted in “furnished with guests”). But poverty does not exclude sins such as pride “my clothes are good enough for him”. So even this step can work at the level of story, and it may be that Jesus' original point was that there is no way into the Kingdom, even for the poor, without repentance.

Good news, then. God welcomes us all to his feast, his presence, of which the Communion you cannot attend today is only a foretaste. But with serious warnings. No room for complacency. On his terms, not ours.