

Sermon Notes for Trinity XX

“not having a wedding garment”

The Gospel for today is clear enough, but scholars tend to make it difficult. It is obvious that the parable of the Great Supper existed in other sources than those used by Matthew, since Luke also has a form of it. But the two evangelists view it through somewhat different filters. Luke, we might say, wants a good story with a strong punch line “none of the men that were bidden shall taste of my supper”. Matthew wants something more like, but only approaching, an allegory. I do not think appealing to the mythical “Q” will help us. Unless we are confident that neither Matthew nor Luke had access to any other source material than Mark and “Q”, we can never know that they did not find similar material by different routes rather than develop it differently from “Q”.

More important than the evangelists, what did Jesus say and mean? We do not altogether know. It is likely enough that he used the parable more than once; it is quite possible that he developed it somewhat in an allegorical direction sometimes. This is a perfectly possible approach for a teacher of his time and place. I do not accept that Jesus never used allegory; the only evidence we have says that he did use it, at least sometimes. I do not accept that just because (we think) a particular form appeals to Matthew (or Luke!) therefore either of them distorted material into that form, rather than being eager to report it.

There is a subtle hazard. We too readily attribute all possible perfections to our Lord (even though the prophecy in Isaiah 53 denies him beauty!). Salvation does not require him to have been a brilliant storyteller (or allegorist). Perfectly God indeed; perfectly man (without sin), but not necessarily possessed of all human perfections.

And we may reasonably say that the first part of the parable is less than perfect. The time taken for the killing of the king's servants and the retaliation on the city is surely more than a day, yet “all things were ready” beforehand. Now there is a scholarly prejudice that original compositions are good and that interpolations are always inferior and spoil them. I do not usually share it. If this is an instance, it is because we know that Matthew sometimes compresses two incidents into one because he wants to keep both after a fashion, yet has to keep within a total length. Jesus can and we are told did predict both his crucifixion and the destruction of Jerusalem. These are not ideas peculiar to Matthew; he does no more than hint at them here. It is more compression than allegory.

But Matthew did not write the first part of the parable as a self-standing item. It leads without a break into what we think of as the second part. A few points. “Go therefore” is an idiom Matthew uses for the Gentile mission (yet it is also a natural enough form). “Both bad and good” is important – even for Matthew, Christianity is not just for persons “which need no repentance”. And so we come to the climax in Matthew's version – the man without a wedding garment. Scholars assert that there was no special dress for this purpose. So it can only be a matter of refusing to be smartened up for the occasion. The point in the parable is that there is a judgement. Matthew will indeed spell this out at length later. God's terms are generous, certainly. But they are still terms. The New Covenant is still a covenant. We are not automatically secure because we have entered it. As Bunyan described it, there is a way to hell even from the very gates of the Celestial City.

But is there a specific meaning to the wedding garment? Protestant piety sometimes asserted it was “imputed righteousness”, and others that it was the Gospel ordinances, but Wesley for one will have none of either. “It is the 'holiness without which no man shall see the Lord.' The righteousness of Christ is doubtless necessary for any soul that enters into glory: But so is personal holiness too, for every child of man. But it is highly needful to be observed, that they are necessary in different respects. The former is necessary to entitle us to heaven; the latter to qualify us for it. Without the righteousness of Christ we could have no claim to glory; without holiness we could have no fitness for it. By the former we become members of Christ, children of God, and heirs of the kingdom of heaven. By the latter 'we are made meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light.' ”

So, in the end, a narrative with some allegorical tendencies, which conveys both God's promise and the risks. Our task is not to evaluate it, but to take care.