

LOOKING AHEAD: SUNDAY OCTOBER 15th

Reading: Matthew 22: 1 - 14 [Pentecost 19]

In their "*Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*" scholars Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh note here "*still another parable directed at Jesus' elite Jerusalemite opponents*" [page 134]. In his *First Thoughts on Passages from Matthew in the Lectionary* William Loader describes this as "*the third parable in Jesus' reply to the question of his authority (21:23-27)*". Matthew has seen in the tradition handed down clear opportunity for a further swipe at the religious leadership in their opposition to (and unbelief in) Jesus. Having addressed their rejection of John the Baptist first in the parable of the two sons (21: 28 – 32), then their rejection of Jesus himself in the pointed parable of the Vineyard manager [21: 33 – 46), this parable uses allegory and images to address the rejection of the ministry of the disciples. Now the long-held picture of an invitation to the messianic banquet is evoked to warn of the dire consequences that unwillingness to embrace the disciples' message has for Israel and Jerusalem. Evidently a similar conflict still existed in the community for whom Matthew records his story of faith. In a clearly post-crucifixion allusion, the servant sent to invite villagers is "*seized and killed*" (verse 6; not mentioned in Luke's version).

Where Luke relates this story as early as chapter 14, Matthew holds it off until later in his overall story of Jesus. In fact, Matthew's particular use of the parable is, to quote the "*New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*", as "*the climax of the triad ... understood from Matthew's own post-Easter perspective, facing Parousia and final judgement*" [*Commentary on Matthew* page 417]. The same scholar writing there suggests that "*this means that the Matthean meaning cannot be derived from the parable alone, but only from the narrative structure of which it is now (in Matthew) an integral part*" [same page].

This Parable has application, by allegory [itself a 'stretched' use of the parabolic story form] to the salvation history of Israel, the people of God. They have first rejected the prophets, ignored Jesus and now, approaching the final judgement so pivotal to Matthew, they again turn away and ignore the message of salvation. That judgement is extended in the telling of this story to the people's rejection of the early Christian communities who now bear that message. Matthew is re-writing history, likely as New Interpreter's Bible comments, "*retrospective view of the destruction of Jerusalem, understood as judgement on rebellious Israel, who had rejected the Messiah*" [page 418].

Scholars have traced this final teaching of Jesus to Jesus' final week in Jerusalem and surrounding events leading to his trial and crucifixion. Noting the Jesus entry into the city (Matthew 21: 1 – 9 on the Monday and the plot for his death 'two days before the Passover (= Wednesday, Matthew 26: 1- 5)), commentators point to this teaching occurring on the Tuesday of that tumultuous week. This is a three parable 'set' gathered to answer a test to Jesus' authority which has been questioned immediately upon his entering the Temple (21: 23 – 27). That the parable belongs in that series is evidenced by 'again' in the opening introductory line.

Familiar in the faith traditions of the people was the picture of a great banquet as sign of the Messianic age. The prophet Isaiah had pictured a time when, "*On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines*" [Isaiah 25:6]. Kenneth Bailey in his "*Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*" notes that this was a notion that the people held onto dearly for all that time, and the changes it underwent. In the subsequent Messianic Rule at the Qumran community, the banquet has "*only Jews who observed the Law would be allowed to attend*" [Bailey page 311]. Fitting his particular perspective of inclusion of the rejected and marginalised, in the Gospel of Luke, the servant is sent to invite specifically, *the poor, maimed, blind and*

lame” [Luke 14: 21]. Matthew now adopts that same hopeful image as a source of judgement and condemnation of ‘unbelievers’.

Contemporary documents outline a common practice in hosting a banquet or feast. An initial invitation is sent to mark the coming occasion. Upon notice of numbers attending, food is prepared. Once all is in readiness a further invitation is sent. In the parable the invitees would have been invited earlier. Now the oxen and fattened calf and everything is ready they are sent with the final call to attend. Bailey calls this the Western equivalent of calling guests to the table from a reception room [page 313]. Refusal now is an offensive, even rebellious act. Malina and Rohrbaugh suggest the impolite practice of finding out “*who was coming and whether everything had been arranged properly, .if the right people were coming, all would come. Trivial excuses follow*” [page 134 – 135]. It would also be a matter of village honour now for the host.

Matthew ups the ante by turning the host from a ‘man’ (in Luke) to ‘a king’. In Luke the guests give specific reason why they are unable to now attend the wedding banquet (“*bought a field, purchased oxen, married a wife*”). In Matthew the invited guests simply “*paid no attention and went off*” [verse 5]. As a sign of the absurdity of the parable the king sends the army to pillage and burn their cities – all for declining an invitation to dinner!! Then the king issues a renewed invitation for an unspecified ‘as many’, both ‘good and bad’ (verse 10; echoes of the Parable of Wheat and Weeds).

Then, like an over-zealous preacher Matthew adds the curious element of the man not properly attired for a wedding celebration. The addition is an ill fit. How could people not expecting an invitation, summonsed at the last moment from the highways and byways come dressed for the occasion? The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary notes that “*the language of changing clothes was utilised to express the giving up of the old way of life and putting on the new Christian identity* [refer Ephesians 6:11, Colossians 3:12]. [Commentary on Matthew, page 418]. As such, Matthew is here extending into a further picture of preparedness and change and making the poorly clothed man ‘naked’ in the wearing of the new faith. And so he is damned.

So whereas for Luke this parable is illustrative of God’s mercy and grace in extending the invitation to feast in the heavenly Kingdom beyond previous limitations to all, Matthew’s glosses and additions render it distinctly judgemental; the God who has acted in the people’s history and been rejected is now rejected in Jesus whom God sends. Jesus religious opponents have missed their moment and places at the messianic banquet are given over to his followers, Matthew’s community.

Kenneth Bailey (above) notes the continuation of the notion of a great feast to which all are invited in the Eucharist. He says, “*at communion, believers are invited, in the present, to participate in the messianic banquet of the end time. We remember the past, celebrate in the present and look forward to the marriage supper of the Lamb. The parable assures the faithful that they already have a place at that banquet*” [page 319].

The point for us in the parable would appear to be not to take this grace for granted. We can’t ‘rest on our laurels’ and simply enjoy the goodness of God’s blessings, the feast. Christian faith is this continuing paradoxical interplay of the grace which includes and invites us and the demand to respond in our living.

THEMES: Grace, God’s invitation, all included, our response
