

## **ANGLICAN PARISH OF ST CUTHBERT'S, TWEED HEADS**

### **19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – 11 October 2020**

Exodus 32.1-14  
Philippians 4  
Matthew 22.1-14

Over the last couple of weeks our sermons have focused on our response and our commitment to God.

Last week Dway told us that part of our response needs to be producing good fruit – the fruit of the Kingdom, fruit that will last.

The week before we considered, how do we respond to God – like the son who said he would go but then didn't, or like the son who said he wouldn't go but then did?

Since his final, triumphant entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of Matthew 21, Jesus has told three parables and they all have to do with this same theme – an appropriate response and commitment to God.

1. The first, the Parable of the Two Sons, illustrated how good intentions alone are never enough, nor is God satisfied with pious lip service.
2. The Parable of the Wicked Tenants last week warned those who think they have a claim on God that the Kingdom will be taken away from them and given to a people who produce the fruits of the Kingdom.

The same theme continues in our readings for today.

In the first reading, Moses is up the mountain with God, receiving the Ten Commandments. But what's taking so long? Why isn't Moses back yet? Where has he gone? The people give on Moses and then they give up on God

and take matters into their own hands. Their love for God hardens. Their commitment to God wavers. Their response now is to look to their own resources to get them through, to their own possessions to save them – their wealth, their gold. These are the gods who brought us out of Egypt, they proclaim. These are the gods who will save us now.

It might sound ridiculous to us – to cast a golden object and call it a god. But isn't that is exactly what still happens today. People commit themselves to wealth and to their possessions to safeguard themselves in the world. In the absence of a belief in the one, true God, they build their own gods and put their trust in them. Such things are, and always have been, false gods and it is immediately obvious that, even though God is loving and forgiving, such actions, such idolatry, such unfaithfulness, are not without consequences. Forgiveness doesn't mean that it doesn't matter.

God's wrath burns hot against them until Moses steps in and reminds God what was promised to the people in love, what God has done for them in the past with great power and a mighty hand. Is it all to mean nothing, to be for nothing? And even though our reading ends with the words "the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people" – the special relationship was broken, and there were dire consequences ahead.

In the final chapter of Philippians, Paul urges the church there to stand firm in the Lord as Paul himself has done – through all of his struggles and torments, through good and bad. "Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you." In other words, in all the circumstances that lie ahead, hold fast to your faith and to your commitment to God. Don't let your faith and your love grow cold. Keep on responding to God's goodness. Focus on God – on all that is true and honourable and just and pure.

The two parables we have already heard in Matthew's Gospel set the scene for the third one – the Parable of the Wedding Feast. Many of us will know how much there is to organize for a wedding. But imagine the preparations needed for a royal wedding. The feast is being given by a king and so we imagine a very grand affair.

We can imagine the huge cost and the prestigious guest list which would no doubt include all kinds of celebrities and people of special importance, people who have a special relationship to the king or a special status that would grant them an invitation. There is recognition and affirmation simply in being invited and it is natural to expect that people would be very glad to receive an invitation, privileged even. We can imagine they would be thinking about what they are going to wear and that they would make a special point of being there.

But the story has an unexpected twist.

The preparations have all been finalized. Everything is ready. What a good feeling. Now the host can sit back and enjoy the celebration with his guests. He sends out his slaves to tell them to come. We assume that a previous invitation has been accepted, but it appears that in a day when people had nothing equivalent to watches and when banquets took a very long time to prepare, it was usual to issue a second invitation. This second invitation now goes out. Maybe the guests are sick of waiting. Because they don't come.

Each of these three parables has an element of the shocking.

It was shocking for a son to refuse to do what his father asked, but even more shocking for Jesus to tell the Pharisees and elders that the tax collectors and prostitutes were going into the Kingdom ahead of them.

It was shocking for the tenants in the vineyard to kill the owner's slaves and son and refuse to pay what was due, but even more shocking for Jesus to tell the Pharisees and elders that the Kingdom was being taken away from them.

In the cultural environment of Jesus' day, it was shocking to back out on an invitation like this at the last minute. It was the ultimate insult. There must be some mistake.

The king tries again. The message is more specific this time. The feast has already been prepared, the oxen and fattened calves have already been butchered. Everything is ready. I am waiting for your response. Come.

But they are too concerned with their own affairs. Their refusal is not the result of some sudden and unexpected emergency. They simply go off to pursue their own concerns. Jesus cites typically shallow excuses to bring out the point that the guests had no real reason for staying away, except that they simply did not care enough to come.

No commitment. No response.

In fact worse than that. Like the tenants in the vineyard, they responded with hostility, rebellion and disloyalty and in another shocking twist those who refused the invitation were destroyed and their city burned.

But the feast will go ahead. If those invited will not respond, the king will find others who will. His slaves go out and invite everyone they find, ordinary people in the streets, until the wedding hall is filled with guests.

The parable could end here, (it does in Luke's account) but Matthew has a further point to make. The king comes in to see the guests and notices a man

not wearing a wedding robe.

The story is obviously an allegory. The meaning of this has to be about more than clothing, for who, being brought off the streets of a burning city, would be wearing clothing suitable for a royal wedding feast? Scholars have speculated about the meaning of the wedding robe, but the implication is that suitable clothing was available – after all, the others are suitably dressed. The man has not cared enough to make use of the opportunity. He has no excuse, nothing to say in his defence.

As John Bunyan observes in his book “Pilgrim’s Progress”, there is a way to hell, even from the gates of heaven. Participation means more than just showing up.

As in the previous two parables of the Two Sons and the Wicked Tenants, Jesus is speaking about salvation history into which people are invited yet may refuse to participate.

He is still addressing the chief priests and the Pharisees and we should not miss the point here that he sees their actions as completely unheard of.

There are a lot of reasons why people refuse to respond, or view such an invitation with suspicion, apathy, refusal.

Like the Israelites in the desert, people still wonder where God is in times of crisis, wonder why God isn’t acting, and come to the conclusion that he is not there, or doesn’t care.

People still deny the existence of God and create their own gods.

People still depend on their own resources to get them through.

People still arrange their priorities in ways that centre around themselves and their own interests.

People still take God for granted or simply pay God lip service.

This falls far short of the commitment God requires and of the response God desires. It is not wealth, or status, or prestige, or reputation that matter. It is how we respond to God.

In the end, it is not God who is the loser.

God's purposes cannot be thwarted by human lethargy or disbelief.

In each of these parables, the loser is the one who does not respond in the appropriate way.

Jesus ends the parable with a warning. Those who hear God's call must not think that the call is the same as a response. Not all the called will be finally chosen. The chosen are known by their obedient response.

We have been called by God. Will we also be chosen?

These parables tell us that it all depends on our commitment and our response.