

15th October 2017: Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost

In today's first reading we heard this:

¹ When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, 'Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' ² Aaron said to them, 'Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.' ³ So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He took the gold from them, formed it in a mould, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'

And later in verse 21 we read this:

"Moses said to Aaron, 'What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?'

Now I do think that Moses did not deliver these words to Aaron in quite the sedate manner in which they are written. Like Moses, I cannot help but wonder what on earth persuaded Aaron to do this. He had seen the miracles that God had wrought in bringing the people out of Egypt. He was with Moses the entire trip, and yet here he is building the golden calf! Was he so afraid of the people, or had he like them lost his faith?

Now true Moses been away for such a long time they thought he had died. And without Moses to guide them, they were lost. They turned to idols and away from God. Little wonder God was annoyed.

But the other part of this passage of scripture that I simply adore, is this;

"Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people."

Moses, manages to get God to change his mind. Here is the amazing depth of their relationship. The prophet pleads for his people, and as it says in Psalm 106, "stood in the breach before him" and the creator doing as he was asked. Now that's the type of relationship with God that we should all strive for.

The parable of the wedding feast is also one that makes us wonder about the faithfulness of people. The King invites people to his son's wedding and they do not come. He sends them new messengers and they still turn away. Then the king invites the people from the street and they come. The rich and powerful say no, but the powerless say yes and respond.

The explanation is plain. God calls the religious leaders and they turn away from Him. So, he calls out to the poor and the despised, and they respond. All seems neat and tidy. But then Jesus throws in the curve ball. He up-ends what we thought we had understood and we are left a little bewildered. Why was the guest being ejected, bound into darkness for simply wearing the wrong clothes. What on earth just happened to the seemingly neat and tidy parable?

The answer lies, in the guest's response to the invitation. He came, but he wasn't really interested. Put another way, he was lukewarm in his response to the King's invitation. How do we know? He hadn't put on his best attire. It would be like turning up to a formal black-tie dinner in jeans and a tee shirt. The jeans may be comfortable, but wearing them shows little respect for the host of the event. And it suggests that you really did not want to be there.

And this is what Jesus is telling us. If we want to enter the Kingdom of God, we can't be half hearted. There is no easy short cut. There is no way of avoiding having to live the message. Simply turning up, is not enough when one does it without a commitment. And if we do, turn up with no commitment, then we will be ejected.

Remember what we heard a few weeks ago, "They who deny me before others, I will deny before my Father? Here is the example, the result, of that denial – bound, cast into the outer darkness. Separated from the light and love of God. No wonder there is wailing and gashing of teeth there. A truly horrible place to be.

Now at this point I could turn into an old-fashioned fire and brimstone preacher. Threaten you with all sorts of dire consequences, tell you all how much you deserve the outer darkness. And it's a shame we don't have a wooden pulpit, on which I could bang my fist, to reinforce my

words. But lucky for you I'm not that kind of person. Although at times. No, no, I jest. But one can see how a passage like this, can engender a sermon of that nature. But focusing on the punishment, the outer darkness, misses the original premise of the parable - the invitation. It's the invitation we need to hear, and with it the corresponding message of compassion, of forgiveness, of love.

Moses asked God to turn away from the wrath and destruction he was to bring on the people, and God did. Moses did extract a harsh penalty on the people, as the later verses in Exodus report, but the infinitely worse divine retribution was stayed. Moses' people, like the wedding guest, were lukewarm to the message and to God. They did not respond to God. They were fickle, turned away and subsequently suffered for this behaviour.

So, we need to remember that the invitation has been delivered to us. We have it here in our hands today. And the church has held it faithfully for over two thousand years. All that is required from us is a passionate, honest and committed response. Are you willing to give such a response to God? I hope so, because the alternative to saying yes, is not pleasant.