

Sermon 15 October 2023

1 Timothy 6:11-16 Matthew 22:1-10

It is quite a common practice today to send out a 'Save the Date' notice some time before sending out the official invitation to a wedding. This was very much the practice and traditional Jewish custom, and this is what happens in this parable as related by Jesus. The initial invitation has been sent out and then when the time was ready for the celebration, the king sent out his servants to summon those who had been invited.

However, the guests found excuses for not attending, and so the king sent his servants out to the highways and byways and invited the strays and waifs. They came and they had a good time.

As always, there are various meanings and I want to refer to three of them. Firstly, this story is aimed at the Jews and it is an accusation. Ages ago, the Jews had been invited to be God's chosen people and yet when God's son came into the world, and they were invited to follow him, they refused. And so who were invited instead? The people from the highways and the byways who represent the sinners and the Gentiles, who never expected an invitation to the kingdom of God. People like you and me.

Of course, there were many Jews who in the end did accept the invitation and they became Christians, but the religious leaders and many others refused to accept Jesus. He didn't fit their bill as the Messiah. They were looking for someone who would lead from the front and conquer all those who stood in their way. They were certainly not looking for someone who preached the message of 'loving your enemies.' And so the Jewish people are still awaiting their Messiah.

Second point. Attending a wedding is a happy time, a time for fun and joy. This parable reminds us that to accept God's invitation to join him is an invitation to join a celebration. All too often life as a Christian is portrayed as boring, very serious and devoid of fun. And to be fair, that is just how some Christians choose to lead their lives. They come across as party-poopers. Was Jesus a party-pooper? Let's remind ourselves that the first miracle Jesus performed was turning water into wine at a wedding. Not exactly the action of a party-pooper.

Jesus wants us to live life to the full. *'I have come in order that you might have life – life in all its fullness.'* John 10:10. Those who believe that entails drinking to excess and sleeping around are kind of missing the point. And, in fact, I would go so far as to say that there is something actually missing in their lives, an emptiness they are trying to fill. But that is another story.

Third point, and a point I want to focus on. One of the interesting aspects of this story is that the reason given by some of the guests for refusing the invitation amounted to the fact that they were just a bit too busy. In other words, they had other priorities, because that's what 'too busy' means. We all have 24 hours in a day. How we use those 24 hours is by and large our choice and will be determined by what our priorities are. So when someone tells me that they are too busy to do something, what they really mean is that they have other priorities. When you put it like that, it kind of brings a different slant to the situation.

So in this case, if attending the wedding was their number one priority, that's what they would have done. So the message for us is, attending to God's work, to God's presence, should be our first priority. If we become too preoccupied with our worldly busyness, we will not have time for God. If we become too preoccupied with our worldly busyness, we will miss out on what is really important.

As a very simple example, how many of us postpone prayer, reading the Bible or making that phone call to see how someone is because we have other pressing matters to attend to, in other words, we are 'too

busy?’ I would be as guilty as the next person. The problem is, ‘later’ invariably doesn’t arrive. Let me relate a true story.

One morning in Washington DC at a Metro station in 2007, a man with a violin played six pieces of music written by the great composer, Bach. He played for about 45 minutes. During that time, over one thousand people went through the station. After about three minutes a middle-aged man noticed that there was a musician playing. He slowed his pace and stopped for a few seconds, then hurried off. After 4 minutes, the violinist received his first dollar – a woman threw the money into a hat and, without stopping, continued to walk.

After 6 minutes, a young man leaned against a wall to listen to him, then looked at his watch and started to walk again. After 10 minutes, a 3-year-old boy stopped but his mother tugged him along hurriedly. The kid stopped to look at the violinist again, but the mother pushed hard and the child continued to walk, turning his head as he went. This action was repeated by several other children, but every parent, without exception, forced their children to move on quickly.

For 45 minutes the musician played continuously. Of 1097 people who walked by, only 7 stopped and listened for a short while. 20 more gave money but continued to walk. The man collected a total of \$32. He finished playing and silence took over. No one noticed and no one applauded. There was no recognition at all.

No one knew this, but the violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the great musicians in the world. He played one of the most intricate pieces ever written, with a violin worth \$3.5 million. Two days before, Joshua Bell sold out a theatre in Boston where the seats averaged \$100 each to sit and listen to him play the same music. Joshua Bell, playing incognito in the DC Metro station, was organised by the Washington Post as part of a social experiment about people’s priorities.

The busyness of those people who hurried past Joshua Bell meant that they had other priorities. If we are to create a community that reflects God’s kingdom, in other words, a community where everyone feels valued and cared for, then we need to be prepared to give one another something which we all have and which is very precious – time.

The guests invited to the wedding feast had other priorities and so they missed out on dining at God’s table. We need to ensure we don’t make the same mistake.

I quote from Hosea 10:12, *‘Plow up the hard ground of your hearts, for now is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and shower righteousness upon you.’* And from our first reading, *‘Pursue a godly life, along with faith, love, perseverance and gentleness.’* This, my friends, should be our priority.

Someone said, *‘Putting God first means prioritising his presence and the purpose he’s called you to.’* To put it very simply, that means making a priority to both acknowledge and immerse ourselves in his presence through prayer and worship, and most importantly, understand his purpose for us and to live out that purpose in our lives. Do that and we can probably justify the label of ‘practising Christians’, albeit fall