

Let my mouth's utterances be pleasing
And my heart's stirring before You,
LORD, my rock and redeemer.

(Psalm 19:15. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. Robert Alter, 2019.)

In the long and challenging wanderings of a people, mistakes were made. A golden idol was formed, the first command was broken, and YHWH was angry. Moses, taking responsibility for the frail and flawed community, encouraged YHWH to remember His covenant, and in time, YHWH's character is revealed. The LORD is merciful, gracious, steadfast in love and forgiveness (32:6-7). We can relax, breathe again, that is the way we like to see God, attractive and relatable.

On the other hand, the Godly King Character in Matthew's parable disturbs us, greatly. What do we do with the vengeance and violence of that King? How do we make sense of the rejection of one man who ignored a dress code? This King doesn't seem to know about the very welcoming community that we espouse as '*church*.' This King is something of an embarrassment. This is a quandary.

For me it helps to look at this story two ways. First in its context, then as the living Word for us today. In its context, Jesus is moving towards the cross. This parable identifies Israel's leaders as those who refused to hear both John the Baptist's and Jesus' invitation to repent and come to the banquet feast. Ample opportunity had been given, but still many rejected God's Son. For Matthew's community, God's anger could be seen in the Roman sacking of Jerusalem and the subsequent destruction of the temple in 70 CE.

The early church, outcasts, fringe dwellers, good and bad, accepted the wedding invitation. They had been street urchins, without power or prestige, so they were grateful and embraced the opportunity to respond well to God's abundant generosity. Thoughtful preparation, clothing themselves in the ways of Jesus and transforming their wretched lives, became a sign for the world of the Kingdom that had come. For them, the ways of the kingdom, expressed in the beatitudes (Matt 5:1-11), gave structure to how God's guests were to be clothed. There were however some who found their way into the banquet yet misunderstood the call of the gospel; they may have been imposters and could be cast into a place of physical and spiritual torment, outside Resurrection Life.

It's hard to imagine now, but in Matthew's day there was very little social support, other than the church. In the first few centuries of the Common Era, a long and demanding religious instruction process developed. In essence this helped to keep phonies from gaining the benefits of the Christian faith community. Sounds strange to our ears. Faithful conviction in Christ however could be seen and known in a transformed, responsive life: Feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, or clothing the naked (Matt 25:35-36). Faithful conviction was unlike someone merely saying '*Lord, Lord*' (Matt 7:21).

So, historically, God is abundantly generous, gracious, and welcoming, blind to status and structures of political power and, God is also judge. Importantly though, judgement is God's alone. Today, I don't think many in the church want to know about judgement of the wicked, or God's demanding standards of holiness. Throughout Christendom, the church too often misappropriated judgement: substituting cultural standards for God's holiness.

Take the judgement that was made on aboriginal lives for instance. Imposing cultural interpretations of family, work, and ownership, robbed hundreds of nations of healthy community life; life that had been sustained for thousands of years. We are all very aware of this and other abuses of the gospel and subsequently there are Christians who experience reputational awkwardness on the topic of judgement. Making it even more confronting, we live in an era where Royal Commissions into institutional abuses of children, the elderly and disabled people have uncovered church neglect.

For centuries art presented the final judgment with vivid pictures of agonising pain with Christ portrayed as an irate revengeful judge. Michelangelo's formidable Christ, in the Sistine Chapel, may have been a reflection on the church's abuses rather than an interpretation of the gospel itself. Separating ourselves from misrepresentations of Christ, our hope in judgement can be that of the consuming fire of God (Heb 12:28-19). That fire is of a loving judgment that we know has already occurred in the cross of Christ. Judgement is only for our salvation not our destruction. The wonderful gift of deeply relational life we have received in Christ, forgiveness and grace, draw selfless responses from us (Matt 25: 31-40). The kingdom is here, and it is still to come.

When the blind and the lame, the prostitute and the extortionists, came to Jesus he didn't say 'You're all ok as you are'. His love reached them where they were, and his love refused to let them stay as they were. Love wants the best for the beloved, transformed lives, healed, and renewed.

Friends the doors are open (figuratively), and even though we are already participating in the joyous banquet, there is always room for improvement. We too were once new to faith, someone made space for us, someone helped us to cloth ourselves in the ways of Christ and someone probably still does.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace be with you. (Philippians 4:8-9)

Rev Dr Kerry Pierce

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