

Pentecost 2

"Happy the man who shall sit at the feast in the Kingdom of God" (Luke 14:15).

When Jesus taught his followers about the meaning of the Kingdom of Heaven, he didn't use philosophical language, he didn't use abstract concepts which only a few would understand. Jesus didn't give his followers a set of rules to obey; he didn't write anything down. When Jesus taught his followers about the Kingdom of Heaven he told them stories. He told them stories about a lost coin or a prodigal son or a good Samaritan. He used true to life situations like fishing or sowing seeds so that his hearers would immediately recognise the situation and be able to say "yes I know exactly what you mean".

In the time of Jesus, when the Jews looked forward in their imagination to the coming of God's Kingdom they often pictured it as a great supper or a banquet. Hence the remark of the pious Jew who was sitting at table with Jesus one day and said, "Happy the man who shall sit at the feast in the Kingdom of heaven". For Jesus this was a cue for a story.

It was a story about a host who prepared a great supper to which he had invited many guests. When the great day dawned he sent a servant around to remind the guests that the dinner was about to be served. (This was customary in those days). But at the crucial moment the invited guests found that they had more important things to do - property to be inspected, oxen to be tested before buying, a new wife to be consulted - and so on.

Predictably the host was not amused. Determined to fill all the places at the table, he then sent his servant out to bring in the waifs and strays, the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. "Call them all in - invite all the casualties of our world in to the great banquet" - says the host, "for I want my house to be full."

A few years ago I was the Priest in Charge of a city centre church in Hull. It was a very beautiful building which dated back to the 14th. century. Sadly it was closed for most of the time. It opened of course on Sunday morning and evening. But for 85% of the time this beautiful place of worship was closed. So, in an attempt to make the Church more available to the people who worked in the city during the week, we decided to open on Friday lunchtimes for Holy Communion. People were invited to bring their sandwiches and to stay for lunch after the service. A notice was placed outside informing people that the church was open and all were welcome. A very worried church member brought the notice back and said with great concern, "You never know who might come in!".

I have a feeling that the pious Jew sitting at table listening to the story of the great banquet was worried or possibly quite shocked at the implications of the story. The Jews in those days were quite convinced that provided they kept the law of God - offered sacrifices in the Temple, ate the proper food and paid their tithes - provided they did these things, and of course could claim that they were descendents of Abraham,; then when the great day came they were guaranteed a place at the banquet. The implication in the story which Jesus told implied that even the poor and the publicans and sinners would be invited. This was too much to bear.

But what's wrong with the attitude of the pious Jew is not so much his self-righteousness as his assumption that the kingdom of heaven is some future event which is promised to those who behave in a certain way. Jesus is more concerned with the present - with the 'here and now'. He challenges us to enter into God's Kingdom in the 'here and now'. The Kingdom of Heaven is not some kind of 'pie in the sky when you die'. The Kingdom of Heaven is the Kingdom of God. In fact the words are interchangeable. The Kingdom of God is the 'rule of God' in our lives. The story which Jesus told, is about our priorities in life. Are our worldly possessions, our domestic ties, our various entertainments which absorb so much of our time and energy; are these more important to us than our fellowship with God. Because, if they are, then we risk losing the only thing which ultimately matters - namely our eternal life. If we think that our happiness is to be found in our material possessions, as so much TV adverts would have us believe, then we are deceiving ourselves.

God's invitation, through Christ, into his Kingdom is continually on offer; and we are continually responding to that invitation. Either we are saying "I have more important things to do", or else we are saying "I know where my happiness really lies. I confess my sins and I accept the invitation into life in Christ".

AS JESUS HIMSELF SAID IN HIS FIRST BEATITUDE, "HOW BLEST ARE THOSE WHO KNOW THEIR NEED OF GOD!".

AMEN