

Prelude: “Air” by Samuel Wesley played on the Laggan organ

Words of welcome:

Where are you as you join in this service of worship? Are you in bed, beginning the day with God? Are you sat in the living room, or the study? Have you taken the service outdoors. Wherever you are, as we come to God, we remember that he is with us and we quieten our hearts so that we may hear and respond to him. So we sing or listen to the hymn:

Hymn: Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One is here (189)

Prayer:

Wherever we are, Lord God you are there. Should we take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand would lead us and hold us fast. We praise you that we can never be cut off from you, except by the dulling of our own perceptions. You are always with us, never leaving us, promising always to help us. We know that we can never deserve to spend even a moment in your presence, but you promise us an eternity which starts here and now.

All we can do is bow our heads in wonder and worship, and raise our hands in praise and thanksgiving.

Forgive us, Lord God, for the times when we are not grateful and do not value all your gifts as we should. Forgive us especially when we take the gift of yourself, both in Jesus and by your Holy Spirit, for granted. Renew our wonder at your love and generosity, so that we may live our lives to the praise of your glory.

We pray in Jesus name and as he taught us, saying:
Our Father who art in heaven hallowed by Thy name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever. Amen

Reading: Matthew 19:27- 20:16

This parable of the kingdom of heaven is another one which it is great fun to act out with the children in school assembly, getting them to mime the picking of grapes (and it is interesting to see how they think grapes grow by how they think they should be harvested – digging, for instance, or with sweeping gestures as of a scythe!) When we do this, I usually pay them with a gold chocolate coin and then we discuss what is the meaning of the word fair. Is it fair that those who worked longest got the same as those who worked the least? And they usually agree that this is not fair.

And they are right. It is not fair that people who work all day in the sun should get the same reward as those who work for only an hour or so. Our human sense of justice rebels at the thought, even if we are only five or six years old.

But the kingdom of heaven is not fair. That is what this story is saying. The kingdom of heaven is not about fairness, which means parity, cool even-handedness, but about grace. The kingdom way of looking at life – God’s way of looking at life – is not to do with fairness but is all about the generosity of grace.

This story turns human expectation on its head. Jesus is saying that no one is hard done by in God’s kingdom. Those who worked longest still got the fair wage that they were

expecting. But others were given more than they deserved or expected because God is generous.

The parable is told in the context of Peter asking about the reward that the twelve disciples can expect. He wants to know what they can look forward to, and why not? Some of us may have been brought up with the belief that we should never ask what is in it for us, when we follow Jesus, but that we should do it for the love of God alone. And that is true – ideally. But few of us can live up to our ideals all the time, and the disciples, Peter at least, yielded to the basic human instinct to find out what it is in it for oneself. Jesus doesn't tell him to be more spiritually minded, instead he answers the question: he tells him what's in it for them. They will judge the twelve tribes of Israel and receive a hundredfold what they have given up for him, and also eternal life – so not a bad return at all. “But,” says Jesus, “but many who are first will be last and the last first.”

The parable unpicks that little enigmatic caveat – many who are first will be last and the last first. In the story not only are those who work longest paid last, but they are not treated as more important than the late-comers. That is not how it works in the kingdom of heaven. God is glad to welcome all comers, at whatever stage in the life of his world or the lives of his servants. It is never too late for us to come to God, and even should we turn to him with our last breath on earth, we will still receive the reward given to all God's children, with no distinction. After all, what those who are first have is the joy and satisfaction of knowing God through life, of being in God's presence, learning from him, working for him, being helped by him.

Is this is how it works in the kingdom of heaven, it is also how it should work in the church: that those who are new in the church family are treated as just as important as those who have been family members for ever and a day: and that's whether we mean new in age – children – or new in terms of joining in with a local congregation. No one is more important.

The kingdom of God is based on generosity and grace; our God loves to give. And yet it will never satisfy those who simply want to know what is in it for themselves. It will never be enough for those who cannot find joy in the life lived with God at the centre; a life of obedience and surprises, a life of hard slog and of tears at times, but a life of purpose which is not our own. That life is part of the extra that God gives to us, the joy of service which is its own reward.

Hymn: Amazing Grace (555)

Reading: Matthew 22:1-14

This second parable that we have read today is Matthew's version of the story of the great feast. It is very similar to Luke's version, except for the wee bit tacked on at the end. We will get to that.

The story is of how the king gave a wedding banquet for his son and no one who was invited thought it was important enough (which means that they didn't think that the host was important enough) to shelve their other plans and turn up. No one came. They weren't asked to cook or prepare or do anything, just to show up - and they couldn't be bothered. In fact they were so much not wanting to attend the party that they killed the messengers sent to fetch them, which seems a little extreme.

If you have ever looked for a reason to be able to get out of an unwelcome invitation, this parable might be one to make you squirm. But if you have ever looked for a reason to get out of an unwelcome invitation, think about that: why was it unwelcome? Was it because you didn't like the inviter? Was it because you didn't like the kind of event you were invited to? Was it because you are an unsociable so and so? (May I raise my hand?) Why did you

not want to go? And might you have got over that feeling – maybe you did – out of respect for your host?

When Jesus' hearers first listened to this story – and he told this story to the people in the presence of the chief priests and Pharisees – they would have understood and felt the shocking disrespect to the King – the King! – of his chosen guests' refusals. Hospitality is important in the Middle East: the hospitality of the host but also the response of the guest. They would know that these excuses were a slap in the face to the King. The first point of the story is that people are being rude to God: they treat him as unimportant, even those who might be expected to give him the most honour. And before we turn that outward to the Pharisees and priests or to the leaders of our own society, (and yes, we can do that, but we shouldn't do it first) we should perhaps turn it inwards to ourselves. Do we – do I – do you – give God the honour that his very being deserves? Do we accept his amazing generosity with joy and gratitude? Always?

The King is angry – and no wonder – he has been hurt. But he is not at a loss for long: the great and the good, those who were specially chosen and who ought to have been there as the elite, would not come, so the doors are thrown open to everyone. And everyone came – the good and the bad, says Matthew. The only qualifications were that you were prepared to drop everything and come, and that you would dress up for it.

Wait, you might say, thinking of the man who is found not to have gone to the bother of dressing up, maybe this man didn't have a robe? Maybe he was too poor. Maybe – though this is a story and we are not given that detail. It is important to remember, especially with longer parables, that they are stories and have to work on that level as well as teaching aids. Not every detail of them is necessarily part of the message. In any case, when kings in the ancient near east gave a wedding banquet, the habit was to provide suitable raiment for the guests. It was part of the invitation. So this man, whoever he was, from whatever walk of life, he wanted to attend, he was pleased to be asked, but he wanted to do it on his own terms. He didn't want to change. In this story, God calls everyone as they are, good and bad, but he expects us to be willing to change. He expects us to be glad to accept the clothing he offers us, which shows us to be his children and his welcome guests.

What holds both these stories together is the generosity of the King in them both. There can be little doubt that the King represents God: God who is more than fair, but is in fact endlessly generous with his rewards to us; God who calls everyone, not just those who might expect it, or those who are good enough to come to the banquet of his presence. The kingdom of heaven is ruled over by a generous King, a King who calls us all, a King who gives to us all more than we deserve or can ever earn; a King who asks that we understand his importance in our lives and the life of the world enough that we will be prepared to drop our doings and follow him; enough that we will be prepared to let him change us.

Hymn Will you come and follow me if I but call your name? (533)

Before we come to God in prayer, let me tell you about next week's service. Next Sunday I will be having a holiday, and you will have the pleasure and privilege of having a service put together for you by the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, Martin Fair. Moreover, if you are linking in through the church websites, you will have a video service this time! We can't make the phone line video, obviously, but we can make the video audio, so the phone service will still be available to people to use as well.

Now let us pray:

Prayers

Lord God, we live in an age where people want to pick and choose what they will believe and what doctrines they will live their lives by, but you ask us to come to you and be changed. Help us to offer our whole selves into your hands, learning day by day how we can use the persons we are to follow Jesus. Help us to give you our desires and our intelligence, our strengths and our weaknesses and allow you to cover us with your mantle of glory which changes us into your children.

We pray this week for our nation as we begin to look to finding a new way of living in normality together. We pray especially for all those who must make and enforce new rules of behaviour which ask us to change. And we pray for all who are seeking to find ways to implement those rules: for shopkeepers and pub owners, for hoteliers and sports clubs, for churches and their leadership. Give graciousness and patience, perseverance and hope to all who are working things out, and give us patience and grace as we learn how to live in new ways.

We pray for those who are still having to be shielded while others are beginning to find ways to live again. We ask that you keep them in health and also in content. Give them hope and peace and the assurance that they are valued, by you and by those around. We pray too for those who are ill or in pain and find that they have to wait longer than they would like for treatment and relief, that you will keep them in your hand and by your Spirit cultivate the fruit of love, joy, peace and patience in their hearts.

We pray for those who mourn, and especially for any who feel that their mourning is unfinished because they could not say the goodbyes they wanted, by a bedside or at a funeral. Assure them of your love for them and for those who have died, and give peace.

As your children, help us to look forward with you to the places you are leading us. We thank you for the many who have been joining in worship with us these past few months, and ask that they know your blessing. We remember your generosity and pray that you will make us generous also, with love and grace, with all that we have and are.

We pray in Jesus name, and for his sake. Amen.

Hymn: The King of love my shepherd is (462)

Benediction:

As God's beloved children may you be filled with wonder and joy at his generosity and love.
And may the grace of God almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit
Rest upon you and remain with you today and always. Amen.

Postlude: "Postlude" by John Naylor of York Minster, played by John Crombie