

October 12, 2008

22nd Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 23a (Exodus 32:1-14; Matthew 22:1-14)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St.J. Hoare, rector

THE WEDDING BANQUET

I am troubled on a number of levels by the parable of the wedding banquet that a king gave for his son. A traditional reading of the story goes something like this. The king is compared to God who invited guests are the people of Israel, and they decline the invitation, killing the king's slaves who are the prophets. The King –God—responds to that by destroying their city, this destruction reminiscent of the flood in the days of Noah of the fall of Jerusalem in the time of Jeremiah. It is what might have happened in the wilderness when the people built a golden calf but for the intercession of Moses. So then the king invited all kinds of people from the streets, good and bad, Jew and gentile, you and me. But even then there is this business of the guest who was not wearing a wedding robe. Most interpreters point out that this is a different story that Mathew has added on here because of thematic similarity to the one that went before and then say something along the lines of our needing to pay attention to the invitation that we have accepted because we can still be cast out.

So there you have it: a traditional reading of the story. It is fine as far as it goes, but why would Jesus compare God to a violent, slave owning, capricious, demanding and demeaning king? Is that a God worthy of our worship? Is there another way to grasp what Jesus is saying here? He says *the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son*. What if the kingdom of heaven is like the whole story rather than like the banquet given by a king for his son? If that is the case, then the story is about a really nasty, demanding capricious ruler of this world who lifts people up and casts them down on whim. No wonder no one wants to go to his party. Maybe the king is a ruler of this world and the world is one in which we try our best to protect ourselves against whim and caprice in life, by focusing on ourselves and our own needs and keeping focused on our own business. When things go wrong—perhaps our businesses fail or life has done us wrong-- we look for people to blame, those who appear greedy or different or convenient objects when we wish to vent our spleen and proclaim our righteousness. So we live in a world of violence and destruction even recognizing the caprice and whim that give rise to such dreadfulness. Is it possible that Jesus knew all this and saw all this; and that he unmasked our ways for managing in the world other than by trusting God and caring for the weakest among us and being the kind of community we were created and ordered to be? Is it possible that this story of the kingdom is what happens when the kingdom of God is among us and so a story of what the world does to the one who does not wear a masque for the ball as it were? And so in the person whom the king casts bound into outer darkness is the one who sees the truth and names it? Could the kingdom be present in the victim? If so, then the way Matthew tells the story is no accident, no mere arrangement of the material by subject, (oh another wedding banquet story with an angry king—let's throw that in here). If it is the whole story that

reveals the kingdom and not a simple analogy then it becomes another prediction by Jesus of his own passion.

If this is a parable of the kingdom in the midst of a world of violence then it is a story for us and a challenge for us. Look at what is happening. Every day we are greeted with news of the collapse of our financial system, a kind of global equivalent of an old fashioned bank run. Maybe the various rescue plans and interest rate cuts will help in restoring confidence, but they won't put humpty dumpty together again. It is as though we are subjects of a capricious king. And what happens to us is what happens in the parable. A headline from last week talked of how the countries of the European Union were all looking out for themselves first. *One went to his farm and another to his business.* Every day there is someone to blame. We hear about the last eight years of failed policies as both candidates try and distance themselves from the oversight in which they both shared for a particular view of the free market system. Anxiety runs rampant and someone can shout 'kill him' at a political rally without immediately being challenged. We hear about the greedy bankers on Wall Street, the same ones incidentally who have advised us on growing our pensions and college funds and who have shown us how to grow the money that we think of as belonging to us because we have somehow deserved it. The language of that mythical beast called 'the market' is the language of faith and our false God is a capricious and temperamental king and we are acting according to type.

So where is that one without the garment and the mask, the one who sees all our folly for what it is and who knows that in anxious times we are looking for someone to blame so that we can get back to business as usual, which means in this instance restoring confidence in the market so we don't have to be so worried and so scared of our capricious king. Jesus will be with whoever is the victim in these times: those among us who have been advised in good faith that we will be able to live off our savings invested in the stock markets and those who work for banks with bad debts and businesses that will fail and churches that will not be able to fund ministries and people who live near the edge in the first place who are allowed to fall off it. The challenge here is that if we are the body of Christ then we will need to stand together and find ways to be with and speak for those who are most vulnerable. This is neither necessarily a time for new programs nor a time for sentimentality about the behavior of those among the poor who do drug deals in our courtyard at night and leave syringes for our sextons to clear up each morning. But if Jesus was predicting his passion in this parable, then we must find ways to stand together and watch for the victims of a capricious ruler of this world.

Those of us who attended our parish weekend at Kanuga last week and who heard Dr. Giles Fraser were treated to a prolonged meditation on the theme of our being 'baptized in dirty water', where baptism was less about cleansing and bathing than about drowning and being born anew in to a new community of faith that lives in a way different than the world. The children baptized this day are being baptized in to a community of faith that at our best cares for one another and for the weakest in the world. We strive to care effectively without creating dependence on us because we know our dependence on God for all of life. We are baptized to follow the one who shows us the

destructive ways in which we behave and calls us week by week to a different way, We follow one who was cast in to outer darkness for being different and refusing to dress up and dignify a world of violence, coercion and the worship of the false God of the market. My prayer is that we will be able to offer some clues as to how to live that way, without fear and in the assurance that as we are loved, so we can face anything in life, even the loss of our pensions. We may not know exactly how right now, but we know that we will be alright in God's grace. We welcome those into this community of faith who will then become a sign with us in this sinful and broken world that we do not need to live in fear, that we can face anything as we know that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that the world through him might live. A frequent prayer on my lips is that God will shine a light on the paths prepared for us to walk in and grant us grace and courage to walk those paths in the assurance that we are loved. Is there a better prayer in response to the parable of the wedding banquet than that? In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray...