

Proper 23 year A 2020

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, there was a young man called Truth; he wandered across the land looking for people to talk to, but no-one would talk to him. Indeed, when they saw him coming, people rushed indoors, looked the door and drew the curtains – because he was naked – and they wanted nothing to do with naked Truth. He was very unhappy.

One day, as he was leaving a village where everyone had hidden from him, he met a beautiful young woman going in the opposite direction. She was dressed in extravagantly rich clothes and seemed full of joy. Her name was Story. ‘Hello, Truth’ she said, ‘why are you looking so miserable?’ ‘No-one will talk to me’ he replied. ‘That’s because you are naked, Truth, and people can’t cope with naked truth. Come with me and I will find you some clothes, and then they will talk with you’. So he went, she gave him clothes and people began to talk to him, listen to him, as they always did with her. Truth married Story and they had six children – Myth, Epic, Apologue (who had the nick-name Fable), Action, Satire and Parable. On Saturday morning when I take home my paper, the first thing I look at is the political cartoon – Satire – a visual way of ridiculing people, pretensions, institutions, those visual stories which expose hypocrisy, thoughtlessness, blatant lying – just think ‘Yes, Minister’ or ‘Spitting Image’.

The chosen child of Truth and Story beloved by Jesus was Parable – the mixture of truth and story which subverts the world by exposing hypocrisy, selfishness, conceit, oppression; stories which attempt to introduce new values and change the way people think about things – and about

themselves – and they nearly always demand that you make a choice, a decision.

Today, Matthew gives us the parable of the King’s Feast. The original parable was spoken by Jesus and addressed to the Chief Priests and Pharisees during an encounter in the Temple, when he is challenged about the source of his authority. He tells them that a King is giving a feast – that is easy to decipher – in Israel there is only one king – God. So God is giving a feast, a common allegory for the restoration of Israel – so they are still with him. This feast is for his Son – God’s son can only be the Messiah, the Anointed One – is Jesus telling them that he is the Messiah? He won’t say, but just a few days before Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, to the acclamation of the crowd. The religious authorities feel threatened. He tells them that some had already been invited to the King’s feast and had accepted the invitation, the religious authorities know that that is them – surely they are first in line?, but when they are summoned, they make lame excuses to be absent. Note that the first people in the story to receive – and reject - the invitation, are the rich and the powerful – they have farms and businesses, and these things are, apparently, more important than the King’s feast. So they ignore the summons, just as they had ignored the warnings of the prophets. The King insists, and more messengers are sent, more prophets, or perhaps by the time Matthew is writing the apostles and the first Christian apologist, beginning with Stephen – and these they kill –. Then we have a little bit of Matthew’s editing – the city is burnt, just as Jerusalem was in 70AD at the hands of

the Roman Army. Some of the members of Matthew's churches in Antioch would remember that, could even have been refugees (or should that be 'illegal immigrants'?) fleeing from the persecution which followed. The King is determined that the feast will take place, so sends out more servants, that's you and me, to bring in the bad and the good – and who is to say who is bad and who is good? The King has his hall full, full of riff-raff and those with whom the first lot would never have sat down – the lame, the blind, tax-collectors and prostitutes, Gentiles, Samaritans, as well as law-abiding Jews. They sit down to 'a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wine strained clear, a feast for all people', as Isaiah had prophesied, not just a feast for people who are like us, or who like us, or whose opinions we can just about live with – all people.. And in Luke's Gospel, that is where the story finishes. The only ones who are absent are those who were first invited, and chose not to attend.

But Matthew gives us another parable, one he has written himself as instruction to the Antioch church (and therefore, to us) - the parable of the guest not wearing a wedding garment. We might cringe – it seems so unfair, he has been invited in off the street, and the King is angry because he is not appropriately dressed! Why would he be wearing anything special? Is this not Matthew telling us that we have to take God's invitation seriously, and always be ready to respond – so ready that we wear the wedding garment at all times, because we can never know when he will summons us to be at his feast, to be at his service. St. Augustine (the one

from Hippo, not the Canterbury one) he tells us that the missing garment is love. Others suggest humility – you know whom you serve, so be ready for service – yet others, that he needed a baptismal robe, a sign of commitment to Christ; the members of Matthew's churches would have put on such a robe after baptism by immersion when they converted to Christianity as adults.

In the letter to the Colossians Paul tells us – 'you should be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience . . . Over all these clothes, to keep them together and complete them, put on love'.

If we hold precious the image of God as generous host who calls both the bad and the good to the banquet of life, the expectation is that we will prepare ourselves now by being dressed appropriately for the occasion. If we are dressed as Paul suggests, we will be ready – and able – to take our seat at the table.