

IS THE COST OF BELIEVING IN JESUS TOO HIGH?

Matthew 22:1-14

During Jesus' ministry, He was always dealing with conflict from the religious leaders. This was the most basic conflict in world history – the one between truth and error.

Jesus was pushed and pulled on every side. The Pharisees hated Him as He lacked obedience to their rules in healing on the Sabbath.

Others resented Him for how severe He was in condemning divorce on trivial grounds.

Jesus brought life but this confused the religious leaders who tried to substitute their regimens and ceremonies for spiritual reality.

Therefore many times Jesus spoke bluntly leaving Him to incur the wrath of His religious opponents.

Now it is very important not to take the parables of Jesus literally. Jesus told many parables but each one is diverse in its meanings and definitions. It is not one size fits all. Jesus uses illustrations which His audience would understand to get across His message.

When reading a parable it is important to:

Identify the original meanings to the audience and Jesus' preaching of the kingdom because most parables illustrate aspects of the kingdom of God. This is especially true for the parable we are exploring this morning.

You also need to consider the cultural, historical and literary contexts. Jesus often borrowed imagery from the Old Testament or from His own cultural and historical contents. All parables have one central point and sit within the overall content of the Gospel for a specific purpose.

Our Scripture this morning is the Parable of the Wedding Banquet. It is included in Matthew's Gospel amongst a number of other parables.

The audience that Jesus wished to challenge with this parable were the Pharisees and other religious leaders who were trying to trap Him. You see they couldn't openly condemn Him as He was a popular teacher of the people.

You may think this parable is a bit outrageous but the Pharisees knew that when Jesus told these parables He was speaking about them. So this parable was directed at the Pharisees and religious leaders.

However, although this parable is not an historical fact it presents the truth of our future and we can learn something from it today.

So let me ask you a question – do you like to go to parties?

Not all of us do, but those that do – what is your favourite party food and party game?

You see most people like a party, especially if you are invited to a special one – wedding/anniversary/birthday – whatever celebration it may be or just a get-together with special friends and family. If it was a special celebration, you would have to have a pretty good reason for not going.

Now the parable told in Matthew's Gospel is also told in Luke's Gospel. Luke adds a bit more information to the parable but basically they reveal the same truth.

We need to keep in mind Jesus' words at the beginning of this parable for He says – now the Kingdom of Heaven is like....

So this king was celebrating his son's marriage – that's pretty exciting isn't it?

He sent his servants out to prepare the food for the feast, uncork the wine, spruce the place up and make sure there is plenty of room for his invited guests.

And it was customary for wedding guests to be given 2 invitations. The first one to ask the guests to attend. And I would suggest that this king invited the more affluent people within the community.

The 2nd invitation announced that all was ready – come now. Now for some reason this king sent out 3 invitations and each time they were rejected.

What were their excuses?

Matthew doesn't tell us but Luke does.

-I have just bought a field – I have to go and see it; I have bought 5 yokes for my oxen and have to try them out; I just got married.

I wonder what excuses would be given today?

-I've just bought a new car and I want to test drive it; I have bought some new clothes and can't wait to try them on; I have a new I-Pad and want to play with it; I have a new client that I need to wine and dine; I am meeting my friends at the pub.

Many excuses can be made – some genuine, many not.

So imagine how the king then felt – furious and after some of his servants were beaten and killed he sent his army to punish and kill them.

To the servants he had left he said – go and invite all that you meet – good or bad. These would not have been the upper echelon but people who were lonely and poor, whose lives were messy.

The king said – invite them all so that my house may be full. For this party is for everyone who accepts the invitation. This party is the best party ever. This party is for everyone – worthy and unworthy. Now who would turn down an invitation like that.

Now as I said in the beginning – Jesus stated – the Kingdom of Heaven is like...this banquet where people are invited. Jesus is showing us in the parable the groups had done nothing to deserve the invitation.

The King didn't favour one group more than the other. His motivation was for them to share in his banquet and be part of his kingdom and life. Both groups were given the same opportunity just as we are.

There is no distinction or judgement based on their behaviour, beliefs, attitudes or morals.

The king sent his servants into the streets to invite everyone they could find – both good and bad.

God welcomes us all in the same way. He doesn't judge us the way we judge others. We often judge others by their behaviour, dress, mannerisms and abilities – a judgement of exclusion.

God's judgement on our lives is one of grace, acceptance and invitation – a judgement of inclusion.

This parable is talking about God's kingdom not ours, not the social life we live or offer to others. There is only one thing that distinguishes their difference. The 2nd group showed up – the 1st didn't.

The key to our life in God is to just show up, to be present. But that can be difficult. We are encouraged to look on others as our priority – not ourselves. We need to see others as God does, as who they are, not who we want them to be or think or act.

It means being vulnerable and trusting of others, actively listening to their stories, letting go of our own agendas, distractions, fears and prejudices.

If we fail to do that we are failing to serve God. We may use excuses – like I'm too tired, too distracted. I have to work and earn money. It is of no real value to me.

We don't have to earn or prove our worthiness as a pre-requisite to entering the banquet. We just need to show up, be present and discover for ourselves the worthiness God has always known about us. That's when our lives begin to change.

Now you may be questioning the judgement of the person who came without wearing wedding clothes. It was customary for wedding guests to be given wedding clothes – so though many of the guests wouldn't have had wedding clothes – they were supplied to them.

Now not wearing the supplied wedding robe was not just a dress code violation. He was speechless as if he wasn't really there or he was trying to hide that perhaps he had snuck in without an invite.

To refuse to wear them was an insult to the host, suggesting the person was too arrogant and didn't want to take part in the celebration, so he suffered the consequences.

Jesus is reminding us that there are times when we show up but we're not really present – our minds are elsewhere. But it may be that Jesus included this in His parable as a rebuke to the Pharisees and Religious leaders who feel that they can sneak into God's kingdom without an invitation, not wearing the clothes of righteousness and no-one will see. But God does and He sees into our heart and our motives – we cannot lie to God – He sees us.

The wedding clothes refer to righteousness which is needed to enter God's kingdom – the total acceptance in God's eyes that Christ gives every believer.

Christ has provided these clothes of righteousness for everyone, but each must choose to put them on in order to enter the King's banquet – eternal life. There is an open invitation, but we must be ready

Jesus has a habit of turning our ideas upside down on what God and heaven are like. And in this parable He is saying – Heaven is like a party and God's love is much bigger and more open and inviting than anyone can imagine.

Are you ready to be surprised by God's love and by who you will meet in Heaven? God wants us to join Him at the banquet which will last for eternity. That's why He sends us invitations again and again.

Is the cost of believing in Jesus too high for you? Have you accepted His invitation or are you still making excuses for why you won't.