**15th October 2023**

**Call to worship**

Rejoice in the Lord always.
Say it again: **Rejoice!**
The Lord is near; **the Lord is here.**
Rejoice in the Lord always.
Say it again: **Rejoice!**

**A gathering prayer**

Lord, your goodness and love
have surrounded us all the days of our lives.
We gather at your invitation,
to rejoice in you,
to bring our concerns to you,
and to know your peace. **Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

All knowing God, if we have come to you today clothed in despondency, **bless us with hope**.
If we have come clothed in anxiety, **bless us with peace**.
If we have come clothed in half-heartedness, **bless us with desire**.
If we have come clothed in resentment, **bless us with grace**.
If we have come clothed in distractedness, **bless us with focus**.
If we have come clothed in failure, **bless us with confidence**.
If we have come clothed in complacency, **bless us with urgency**,
that we may worship you with the best of all we have and are –
in Jesus’ name. **Amen.**

**A prayer of adoration**

Generous God, we kneel in awe at your willingness to draw us into your fellowship; in wonder at your gracious invitation to join the feast of life; in gratitude at your care for each one of us; in humility for your faithfulness towards each one of us. Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we kneel and worship and adore you. **Amen.**

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

Gracious God, you invite us to join you in caring for the vulnerable,
and we hurt you when we do not accept your invitation.
**We are sorry and ask your forgiveness.**
You invite us to share the good news of your love,
and we hurt you when we do not accept your invitation.
**We are sorry and ask your forgiveness.**
You invite us to clothe ourselves with compassion and humility,
and we hurt you when we do not accept your invitation.
**We are sorry and ask your forgiveness.**
You invite us to take our place at your table,
and we hurt you when we do not accept your invitation.
**We are sorry and ask your forgiveness, in Jesus’ name. Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Eternal God, you clothe us with forgiveness, you cover us with your grace, you feed us with your word, you robe us with your generosity, you root us in your faithfulness, you gather us in your love, you invite us to be your disciples, and you go all out to draw us all in and call us each by name. **Amen.**

**A prayer of thanksgiving**

We give you thanks, wonderful God, for the gift of life, for the opportunities of life, for the invitations to flourish in life. May we be as whole-hearted as you in all we do, as generous as you in all we give, as daring as you in all we dream, and as faithful as you in all our relationships. Thank you for everything. **Amen.**

**Matthew 22.1-14**

**Sermon**

I went to a football match at my beloved Burnley last week. It was the first match I had attended since May. In May we were about to be crowned the champions of the league, the Championship that is, the league below the Premier League, for those not au fait with football matters. My brother, a season ticket holder had cashed in some shares with eh football club and had hired an executive box for the match. He had invited some friends including myself and Sam, his nephew to enjoy the game together in the sumptuous surroundings of the hospitality suite. We had a table and a bar and a three-course meal. There was a pre match speech from a former player. There were other celebrities in the room also enjoying the corporate hospitality. There were some WAGs present (Wives and Girlfriends of the players for those who don’t know what WAG stands for). We were mixing with the hoi Palou. The wealthy, the attractive, the achievers the successful.

Last Saturday I took my brother to the game in a wheelchair. His health has declined since May and the only way he is currently able to attend a match is by using the accessibility stands. Burnley have built these in two corners of the ground for people who are disabled or have special needs. You go in and get a lift up to various levels where you can then go out on to a level and watch the game, either in a wheelchair or on a chair by the side for your carer.

My son, Sam had taken Andrew to a game a few weeks earlier and so had told me what to expect. He said ‘Dad, it’s a great facility. But it has a whiff of wee!’

It was a hot day if you recall last Saturday. When we got to our level, I wheeled my brother out. The toilet was close by, an essential for these areas and the needs of the people suing the accessibility stands. As we sat there, in the heat, sure enough I got the whiff.

Adjacent to us were the hospitality boxes. Just a few months ago I was wining and dining in one of those. I thought to myself. Where would I rather be?

Well, I want to be with my brother. I want to be with my brother.

Our society is competitive. People chase success and prosperity, and they want to be seen in the right places and have a cool appearance. Millions are spent on marketing to try and sell the image of coolness or being the in thing on trend at the moment. It was interesting observing the party-political conferences these last two weeks. At the Conservative Party Conferences the conference hall was nearly empty for most of the speeches, with only a full house for the Prime minster. Whereas the Labour Party conference there was packed halls for most of the shadow cabinet – people smell success and power, and they want in.

It takes a socially confident person to organise a party. Most of us think, will I have enough friends who will come. Will I have those annoying people who say they might come, until they get a better offer somewhere else, and they ditch you. The FOMO people – fear of missing out. No one wants to be at the party that is half empty with no atmosphere and where the ‘cool people’ aren’t!

It’s a headache organising events for the church. Will people turn up. Will it be viable. You know it will be good – but we have so many ‘good events’ where we think I wish more people had come.

Church going has never been cool. Arguably a couple of generations ago in this country, going to church was associated with being a good person, an upright citizen, a sign of respectability and if your bosses went to that church a chance for aspiration and being noticed and getting on. Now in this country going to church is seen as a bit weird. Normal people don’t do it. The atheists have done a great campaign in convincing the population that people who have faith don’t think, believe in fairytales and that sensible rational people don’t go to church. Our sex obsessed society thinks the church is puritanical when it comes to matters of sex and sexuality – that we are prudish and bigoted. That we discriminate against those from the LGBTQ community – that we are not fully inclusive. There is racism and sexism in the church. If you have been reading the URC daily devotionals emails, this week they have all been under the theme ‘I am still a Christian despite…’’ Right encouraging reads first thing in the morning they were. NOT. It is inevitable when we look at the human church and take our eyes of Jesus, the light for our way, our Lord and Saviour – the one who saves us from our sins – for we are all flawed. There is the whiff of wee about all our institutions, groups, and organisations.

Why do I bother with the church? Because my brothers and sisters are there. We’re all disabled to some degree.

These Puzzling Questions course is aimed at those in our society who are not interested in church. They may not have any awareness of idea of what the Christian message is but who may have some uneasiness or sense of emptiness about life: that our searching for health wealth and happiness is not all there is to life. That there are still deep questions to be explored and faced if you want to live a full free life. Who are you? Is there a God? What happens when you die? How can you be happy. How can you cope with suffering. Is there a spiritual dimension to life? Invite people to these meetings. They can only say no.

William Temple (former Archbishop of Canterbury) is quoted as saying that the Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of non-members. So, how well are we doing? Remember, it is not what you think about yourself that counts, it is how you are perceived. Research has shown that almost all churches think they are more welcoming and inclusive than they actually are.

Imagine you went to church in a far-off country — you are the outsider, perhaps with a different colour skin, and not knowing the language, customs or culture. How would you be received? How would you be treated? Would you expect them to make an effort for you? So, how well are we doing?

State ceremonies, be that a wedding, funeral or coronation, all of which we have witnessed in recent times in the UK, involve all manner of protocols about who should or should not be invited, where they sit, what they wear, and so on.

There was a lot of speculation whether Harry and Megan would turn up for the coronation – in the end only Harry came. Some joked that he would get a restricted view seat – a bit out of the way.

Refusal of an invitation, particularly if it has previously been accepted, is not merely rude but potentially a calculated insult, that in ancient times could have had disastrous consequences – particularly so if, as here, the royal messengers are assaulted or killed. Does the kingdom of heaven operate in a similar fashion? And what about our church?

Any wedding reception is limited by the capacity of the venue, and the pocket of the person paying the bill. The former was a major factor as we emerged from Covid-19 lockdown with social distancing still in place. Who would be invited became a critical question, and perhaps brides and grooms hoped that some of those who ‘had to be invited’ (family politics!) might turn down their invitations, so that they could invite others that would otherwise have to be left out. In this week’s story, the refusal of some to attend means that all manner of unlikely people are invited into the wedding feast, regardless of their social, or indeed moral standing. Are there capacity restrictions in the kingdom of heaven?

Our bible reading is about an invitation to a party and those who say they’ll come but then find excuses.

In this parable, Matthew 22.1-14, as in the preceding two, Jesus is speaking to the religious leaders. This wedding banquet story follows immediately on the tail of his direct comment that the kingdom of God will be taken away from them and given to those who produce kingdom fruits (21:43). Jesus’ earlier comment is illustrated as those who have been invited to the wedding banquet refuse to come, and the king throws open the invitation to all. The people of God were set apart by God, a chosen people, not in the sense of being elite, but rather chosen to show God to the other nations. Having failed to take this seriously, they have lost their status.

There are some stark images in this story. The invited guests do not merely fail to show up: they refuse, they insult, they kill the messengers.

In Luke’s version of the wedding banquet parable the excuses are lame and insulting. One guest says they have just bought a field and I must go and see it. That’s a bit like saying I’ve just bought a house and now I need to go and see it. No one buys a field or a house before seeing it first.

The second excuse in Luke is that I’ve just bought some oxen and now I’m on the way to try them out. Again, you would have seen if the oxen work well together – have a similar speed and pull together and tire at the same rate before you buy them. The last excuse was ‘I’ve just got married so can’t come. How rude. I’ve got a wife back in the house and I am busy with her – use your imagination. I can’t be bothered coming to your party.

All these excuses are rude and even offensive.

In Matthew’s version you also get them murdering the messenger.

The king does not merely feel anger: there is a severe consequence. The meal is interrupted long enough to allow the King to muster troops and destroy the invited guests and burn their city.

You could say this makes this parable a bit unrealistic and unbelievable. Yet look at what is unfolding in the so-called Holy Land.

The barbaric attacks by Hamas militants or Hamas terrorists depending on your point of view are indefensible. They are a crime against humanity. The reprisals and punishment will no doubt equally be a crime against humanity. Already Israeli airstrikes have indiscriminately flattened civilian housing and killed as many as Hamas have done in their terrible riads. Violence begets more violence and innocent people will be caught up in it. And the underlying problems of this Israeli Palestinian conflict will continue to not be addressed, nor solutions found based on justice and equality and peace. The devil is the only winner.

Back to the parable: this judgement on the original guests was deemed to be a comment on the Jewish rejection of the Christian message in the time of Matthew writing this gospel and the judgment born by the Romans in the destruction of Jerusalem and the putting down of the Jewish revolt around 70AD.

Those who are invited instead do not fall into certain categories; everyone is invited, good and bad. As an image of the kingdom of heaven, God is generous and our response matters. For Matthew at his time, the guests in from the streets were the Gentiles.

But just as in the previous two parables, the narrator will not let the audience bask complacently in the judgement pronounced on others. The jolt comes with the final scene – the guest found at the wedding ceremony without a wedding garment.

At the time the custom was for the host – in this case the king – to provide wedding robes for the guests. All guests were dressed similarly, so role and status were irrelevant. The guest in the parable who has continued to wear his own clothes wasn’t wholehearted in his acceptance. He has not joined in with the necessary preparation for the banquet. He has stood apart, attending on his own terms and this, too, has a severe consequence. He is discarded and thrown out into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The story works to challenge the smugness of the audience. As in every period of church history Matthews community is made up of the good and the bad. Sometimes the issues are whether the community should rid itself of the bad, pull up the weeds that have grown among the wheat to quote another parable (13,24-30,36-43). Here there seems to be no such issue, only the effort to confront the audience with the hapless and disquieting figure of the person who got the dress code wrong.

In the allegorical retelling of this parable what do the wedding clothes signify?

The symbolism here is that of clothing representing one’s spiritual state (see, for example, Romans 13:12, Galatians 3:27). When we stand before God we will be in filthy rags – but the Bible tells us because of what Jesus has done for us we will be clothed in Robes of Righteousness. All will have the same standing – no roles or status – all brothers and sisters in Christ.

All are welcome in the kingdom of heaven, but a wholehearted acceptance of God’s invitation is needed. It represents authentic discipleship. The parable prods the audience: you and me – to self-criticism are we full of ourselves – I’ll dress how I like, I’m an induvial, no one tells me what to wear. Or are we humble enough to accept the Kings’ clothing. Is their humility in our responding to the King’s invitation?

We may not understand all of the allusions in Jesus’ story, particularly as it turns from a seemingly happy story of a royal wedding to one of war, murder and mayhem, but key to it is the idea of who is invited and who accepts. There are no moral criteria; both ‘good and bad’ are, in the end, invited in. No one earns their right to be there. Then, perhaps, we remember that this is not really a story about wedding customs, it is about the kingdom of God.

And then we read the sting in tail: one person is ejected. Everyone is invited; but there is more than one way of not accepting the invitation.

Will you let God reclothe you? We are not expected to go wearing the rags of bickering and fighting, lying and cheating, self indulgence and lack of self-control. We all have a whiff about us. We are all flawed. Yet are we willing to let God do God’s work of clothing us with the robes of righteousness. Making us Christlike: clothing us with mercy, love, justice, peace…

Have you accepted the invitation? Have you been clothed with the right attitude. Wholehearted acceptance? Your dependence on the mercy and work of Jesus?

**Prayers of intercession**

Living God, your Son lived among the people of the Holy Land and mixed with both Jews and Gentiles. Your banquet is a feast for all to share in harmony and peace. We pray for those whose lives are shattered by warfare and conflict. We hold before you Israelis and Palestinians, Russians and Ukrainians and all who live in fear of the bullet and the bomb.

God who offers peace to those who will receive it,
**May all people say yes and accept your love**

You invite leaders and outcasts; those with plenty and those with nothing; lawmakers and lawbreakers. We hold before you the leaders of all the nations of the world. They desire the best for their people; help them to see the needs of their neighbours as well. May all rejoice in the diversity of humanity and co-exist without violence and oppression.

God who offers peace to those who will receive it,
**May all people say yes and accept your love**

In your banquet there is food for the needy. You welcome the hungry, the homeless and those who have fled their lands in fear to seek refuge in a strange country. In you there are no barriers of language or background; of gender or age; of employment or unemployment. Your welcome is fulsome; your invitation is to all. We hold before you those who feel excluded for whatever reason. May we see your image in all our neighbours and show the love we have received.

God who offers peace to those who will receive it,
**May all people say yes and accept your love**

God of comfort and healing, you invite the sick and sorrowful as well as the healthy and happy to your great feast. For many, this is not a time for celebration. Many grieve for loved ones – those who have died recently or for whom this is a time of anniversary. Many are worried as they wait for medical appointments, test results or treatment. Many are in pain and their loved ones sit beside them feeling helpless. We hold before you our health service and pray for all involved in it - doctors, nurses, administrators, managers, porters, health care assistants. We commend to you all who are sick and sorrowful naming in our hearts, especially those we know….

God who offers peace to those who will receive it,
**May all people say yes and accept your love**

God of the Great Banquet, we stand in amazement, holding an invitation with our name on it! We will be welcomed and accepted. We will receive healing and peace. We will be fed and treated as your special guests. We stand before you in wonder at the height, depth, breadth and length of your love. We celebrate your presence.

God who offers peace to those who will receive it,
**May all people say yes and accept your love**

As we say yes to you,
we hear you say a resounding "yes!" to us
and in that we rejoice.
In Jesus' name.
**Amen**

**A prayer for all ages together**

O God, our shepherd king: **we thank you**.
For being present and providing for us,
or guarding and guiding us, **we thank you**.
For bringing us good days and bringing us through dark days, **we thank you**.
For your invitation to your heavenly banquet, **we thank you**.

**A sending out prayer**

Go into the week ahead, and wherever you find yourself,
celebrating or sharing a sadness, or anything in between,
may you rejoice in God’s grace.
See each moment as an invitation to meet with God,
each meeting as an opportunity to invite others.
Until we meet again. **Amen.**