

Sunday 11th October 2020

St John the Baptist, Crowthorne

10 am: Holy Communion

Year A

18th after Trinity/ Proper 23

Readings: Isaiah 25:1-9
Philippians 4:1-9
Matthew 22:1-14

Context: “New normal” during Covid 19 pandemic.

Theme: “Rejoice in the Lord always”

If you were here last week and awake, then you will observe that the lectionary readings for October have prompted a mini sermon series on Paul’s letter to the Philippians, which, happily for Gillian and I, corresponds to our Autumn Course. It couldn’t have timed better. But before I direct the spotlight on the epistle, let’s turn to the gospel reading as our springboard.

In the passage from Matthew’s gospel we have a parable in which the Kingdom of God is likened to a wedding banquet where all are invited. This, of course, is laced with irony in our present situation. Not many of us will have been to a wedding this year. Weddings have been postponed up and down the country. We are glad that James and Sophie could still go ahead in the summer and some of us may have been able to view the edited highlights from Dave’s livestream. The plan was to follow it with a blessing ceremony at St John’s so everyone could have a piece of the action but that will have to wait until next summer.

Since the end of September, numbers for weddings have been further restricted from 30 to 15, including the bride and groom. There was, however, one heartwarming story on the London local news of an Asian couple who got around the restrictions by having all the guests they wanted remain in their cars in a field for the ceremony and reception. Food was delivered to the cars and the couple were able to go around and greet all their guests.

So being a member of God's kingdom, of God's church, is like being part of a wedding banquet where there are no restrictions on numbers attending.

Faith is meant to lead to joyous living, to abundant life - to a life, that while not free from troubles, is filled with peace. The problem is that we often think that all we have to do is show up and follow a set of rules. Because of that, we end up failing to clothe ourselves in the garments that God provides for us, just as the wedding guest in the parable, failed to wear the wedding suit provided, and ended up being evicted from the banquet. It seems terribly harsh if we miss the point that Jesus is trying to make with the metaphor.

When we go to a wedding we put on our best outfit. We have been sought out by God and invited to his banquet of life, a banquet in honour of his son Jesus. We have been enjoined to rejoice and find true joy in life. Do we join the celebration? Do we have the faith we need? Have we put on the clothing of righteousness that Christ offers to us? Have we changed for the feast? Or, do we wear our old clothes and live in the old way?

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul recommends four simple ways in which we can begin to experience the joy and peace of Christ; four ways in which we can don the wedding clothing provided for us by Christ and retain a place at his wedding table.

Before I come onto these, it is important to remember the context of Paul's letter, since there are some parallels between the situation in which Paul and the Philippians found themselves and our own Covid context today. Paul was in lockdown. In his life dedicated to serving Christ, Paul has faced untold sufferings. He writes from a prison cell in Rome, to an anxious, fearful and divided Church in Philippi. They have many questions about the present and future. Paul writes to strengthen and reassure them.

In the passage for today, Paul's first recommendation is that we "rejoice in the Lord always". The concept of rejoicing or joy appears 16 times in the letter. *How do we rejoice at a time when*

we are not even permitted to sing? When we are dispirited, when we are lost in our own weariness, troubles or fears, it may be hard to feel joy. It doesn't mean that we rejoice because of the bad things that happen to us. Instead it is about rejoicing in the midst of and despite our difficulties, because of our salvation in Christ. Neither is it a superficial cheerfulness – joy coexists with pain. “The Lord is near” writes Paul. When we are reminded of the God's love for us, we can be moved towards joy and begin to rejoice. That is a part of the clothing we can wear to the wedding banquet. Nothing looks as good as rejoicing.

Knowing that God is near, Paul goes on to say: “Do not worry about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” One thing that prevents us from putting on the wedding clothing of God and enjoying his banquet is anxiety and fear. The Christian life is not problem free. Bad things still happen but God is near to us and, while He may not prevent those bad things from happening, he can help us through them. But we need to ask. It is in asking, which we do by prayer, that we allow his presence to uphold us. Paul says that when we do these two things, when we rejoice in the Lord, and present our requests to him with thanksgiving, that the Peace of God that passes understanding will fill us, and will keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.

The third thing Paul recommends is that we set our minds on good things. Paul writes: “Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable... think about these things.”

Think about good things - concentrate on what is good, not bad.

Make it a habit to look for and dwell on the true, the honourable, the pure, the pleasing and we will not be without rejoicing. It is notable that during lockdown we started to appreciate many of the things that we usually take for granted. We became more observant of the blessings in life.

The final thing Paul recommends to the Philippians is to keep on doing the things that they have learned and heard and seen in Paul. What Christians have you truly admired? What impressed you with their faith and how they lived? Put into practice what you have seen and heard.

By putting on our wedding clothing -

by rejoicing in the presence of God,

by praying and offering thanksgiving to God,

by filling our minds with good things -
and following the good Christian example set by others,
may we discover for ourselves the joy of the Christian life,
a faith that will sustain us through pandemics,
a life that shines and brings comfort and joy to others.
Rejoice in the Lord always. Amen.