

St Martin in the Fields.

Sunday, October 15, 2017 Matthew 22:1-14

It is so good to be with you all this morning, especially during the 'Just as I am' disability conference. Today marks the start of my sabbatical and what a way to start it. Many thanks to Sam for your kind and generous invitation and for Jonathan and Fiona for twisting Sam's arm! It is a real privilege to be here.

In our Gospel this morning, the King commands his servants to "Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet," and they gathered up everyone they found, "both good and bad," so our Gospel says.

This made me wonder . . . what if we took this command seriously and literally, today, and walked out these doors, here in the centre of our capital city. . . who would we invite to the banquet?

I intentionally spend time out on the streets of the parishes where I serve, especially the Godstone Road, and view this time as much a part of my priestly calling as leading worship on Sunday mornings or sitting at my desk, working on administrative details or writing sermons. It is not as exciting as here by Trafalgar Square, right outside our doors, where there are shops, galleries, theatres and

restaurants. There are traffic lights and bus lanes, pedestrian crossings and walkways. And yet what links both the Godstone Road and Trafalgar Square together are people. People waiting. People walking. People wandering. There are those who come from large homes, and those without any home. Look outside! Look inside! There are bankers, sandwich-makers, and homemakers; postal workers and cleaners; chefs and florists; shopkeepers and bus drivers. There are tall people, short people, people of all races and creeds, people on sticks, in wheel chairs. There are people who are stuck, on the Charing Cross Road, inching their way through in traffic bumper to bumper. But according to today's Gospel, all of them are invited to the king's banquet.

We like to nod our heads and affirm Gospel truths like this. 'Everyone is invited, all are welcome,' we say, without hesitation. But when we step out of this safe space, and on to Trafalgar Square or for me, the Godstone Road, living that truth suddenly gets interrupted by those metaphorical bumps in the road and cracks in the pavement that are caused by fear, distrust, and difference. Actually, we spend most of our lives in training to resist difference and diversity. I've heard it called the "hidden curriculum of our culture," and we've all mastered it.

So the goal in this morning's Gospel is to attempt to undo what we've learned, and actually see the other person, every other person, as

one worthy of God's invitation; the "good and the bad," as Matthew writes. By doing so, we experience the Kingdom's banquet, the likes of which we could never have imagined. That which scares us most and keeps us in our comfort zones is what closes us off to the potential and possibility for transformation.

Thomas Merton, the American Catholic writer and mystic experienced and described a mystical transformation, which overcame his fear of difference when he went out into the street and suddenly felt the distance between himself and others evaporate away. He wrote, in 'Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander', of a sudden and overwhelming realisation that he loved all of the people there. He wrote, *"they were mine and I theirs, that we were not alien to one another, even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious (or false) self-isolation in a special world . . . and at that banquet everyone was walking around, shining like the sun."*

This must have been what the King in today's parable saw, because in God's eyes, there are not two kinds of citizens in God's Kingdom; no back-door citizens, shuffled in, in quiet shame, nor are there front door citizens, poster children for saintly behaviour. No, there is only one kind of person in God's kingdom, and as Richard Rohr, the Franciscan theologian writes,

"...there is only the utterly vulnerable person who is in desperate need, whether of comfort, healing, wholeness, forgiveness, hope, you name it. God's kingdom is a kingdom of the needy whom God calls blessed."

And that's all of us. And that's everyone on Trafalgar Square, everyone here, everyone on the Godstone Road – everyone period!

Of course, it's hard to let ourselves be so vulnerable. Difference is concerning, if not downright terrifying, and the Gospel's notion of extending invitations to all of the people in the streets shakes us at our core. Let me give one pertinent example of our diversity.

I want to take a moment to paint a picture of a mythical nation. If it were possible to gather together all the disabled people in the world into one nation, that nation would number approximately 650 million. That's more than ten times the population of the United Kingdom. In fact the nation would be the third largest in the world after China and India.

I would like to now share some of the unique characteristics of this mythical nation. It would have the least access to education. It would have the lowest proportion of its population in employment in the world. It would be the poorest nation on earth. It would have the least access to transport and it would be the least evangelised nation with

the lowest proportion involved in a church. It would also be the least listened to. It is also true that everyone of that 650 million is being invited this morning to the wedding banquet.

This is why the Disability Conference being held at St Martin's this weekend is so important. The inhabitants of this mystical country are speaking up and we are speaking out because we belong to each and every country. We are sharing our lived experience because we have important stories to tell. We are not separated from the king's invitation for we, like everyone in Trafalgar Square and on the Godstone Road, like everyone anywhere, are made in the image and likeness of God and are loved by God beyond all measure.

For too long society and the church has mastered that "hidden curriculum," and as a result the fear of difference has led for so many to an experience of disability that is distant and not relational. Sure, those "Lifetime" movies where people are cured, or where they heroically overcome their obstacles inspire and delight, but it's another thing altogether to live into the hard work of accommodation, acceptance and mutuality.

Celebrating our difference and diversity can be hard, which is why we all come together, here, as a community week in and week out. But it's not impossible. Here at St. Martin's, when we go out into the world and sit with those who are lonely or unable to leave their

home, we are offering God's invitation. When we bring the Eucharist to the residents in assisted living, we are offering God's invitation. When we sit and listen and learn from the paralysed, those with physical or learning impairments, from the autistic or those in mourning or those who are homeless and we welcome them and they welcome us, we are offering and receiving God's invitation to the wedding banquet.

So, what happens when we're all invited to the wedding banquet, when we all belong? Well, we connect through our giftedness, sure, but we also connect in those places of vulnerability. And what does that look like, I wonder? Well, I believe that it looks like the Body of Christ in the Kingdom of Heaven. Amen.