

Mathew: 22 1-14 - Liberation and inclusion in God's Kingdom

Couldn't we change this morning's gospel? Another parable on judgement!

Isn't it easier to ignore difficult passages? After all, we really need hope in 2020....?

The following words by Jessica Martin in her recent book 'holiness and desire,' might help, as we struggle with today's passage in Mathew. She writes

'In scripture we do not only meet God. Scripture is the divine and the human mixed up together. A lot of scripture simply describes the mess. Cherry picking for the bits we can stand to hear is a kind of cheating.'

I'll recap the gospel but, first, let's remind ourselves, who Jesus is talking to:

This parable is part of an ongoing confrontation Jesus had with the Pharisees and Chief Priests, a week before his death. The people had a very long history of oppression and exile. They were caught up in an ongoing cycle of retaliation - a cycle which plays out in different ways today?

If you can bear with this, I'll recap the story's highlights:

The King invites guests to his son's wedding feast, but they don't want to go. So the King sent more invitations, which were also ignored. Then they killed the slaves who delivered the invitations. In revenge the King sent troops to kill those who killed his slaves. Next, a brief inclusive interlude..The King invites anyone from the streets, the good and the bad - phew! If only the parable ended here?.....

Yet it finishes with a perplexing twist, where one guest is thrown out for not wearing the right wedding outfit? Not wearing the right clothes?

Hardly a heinous sin, through our eyes! After all, we dress much more informally these days. I'm wearing trainers at the altar!

Even if our dress codes are more relaxed today, do we conform to subtle cultural codes, which are equally divisive? The structure of the passage moves from exclusion to inclusion and back to exclusion. Do we recognise this in our society today?

On the one hand there have been amazingly hopeful movements in history which have broken down barriers. Barriers which cast people out because of their gender, race, sexuality, disability, or economic power. And yet even in 2020 the reality of racism hit home again in the tragic murder of George Floyd and the many current stories of racism and discrimination.

Exclusion, inclusion, exclusion...the pattern comes out again in the final verse of the Gospel:

‘Many are called, but few are chosen.’

On a lighter note, this verse reminded me of *bake off*, where one presenter names the star baker and the other presenter names the person to be cast out of the tent! And Paul Hollywood goes on to say what a gifted baker they are, having done so well to get into the tent, but they just aren’t good enough to stay in.

On the surface, today’s parable completely goes against how we read scripture, as the unfolding story of God’s love, mercy and goodness for all.....where grace is always stronger than revenge....

But does the play off between exclusion and inclusion running through today’s gospel still connect to our lives and society?

We live in a world where people are cast out, where Politicians discuss proposals to send asylum seekers to inhospitable islands thousands of miles away?

We live in a world where the destructive cycle of retaliation and fear dehumanizes people. So how do we trust in the divine amongst the human mess?

October marks Black history month, where the contributions and achievements of Black people are celebrated, having been sidelined in history. Even more so this year, through the impact of the Black lives matter campaign which we hope will be the catalyst for Black history to be shared more widely, influence a different future, where systemic racism is eradicated.

Per-haps there are particular people who inspire you through Black History month? Some which connect to your own experiences or stories which give you hope? There are many stories but a speech by Dame Baroness Doreen Lawrence to launch a new charity. seemed to encapsulate this pattern of progression set against continued injustice, a theme which struck me about the gospel today and our society in 2020.

Twenty seven years on and not all young people have heard the name Stephen Lawrence or know his story. But 2020 has shown us that Stephen's story - unequal treatment because of his skin colour, - is as relevant today across the whole world as it has ever been. George Floyd's murder opened many people's eyes to the extent to which racial inequality remains prevalent.....I nonetheless have great hope for the future. The tragedy of George's death was met with an unprecedented and passionate response from people around the world for an end to racial inequality.

Let's end with a Prayer for Black History Month (from Jesuit resource.org)

Spirit of Abundance, God of Grace, Mother of hope,
We pause now to remember those stories that are all around us,
But so often passed over.
This month is Black History month.
Help us to realise that Black history is all our histories.
May the day come when these stories
Are so widely taught that no month need
Be separately divided.
Give those full of fear - hope.
May we come to know grace
So our hearts will not be hardened to the pain around us.
There are so many beautiful stories needing to be told.
And we need the chance to hear them.
Widen our vision so that the history that is shared this month,
And every month
Come to be known as our history
We are most human when we see the humanity in others.
Amen

