Homily – 28th Sunday in Ord. Time (A)

*Is.25: 6-10, Phil.4: 12-14, 19-20 & Mt.22: 1-14*

I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but for the last few Sundays our gospel readings have all been rather similar. They all come from a section of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 21-22, following his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the first “Palm Sunday” – and so are “contexted” by the increasing controversy surrounding Jesus in the last week of his life. And all are about the contrast between two people, or two groups of people. Two weeks ago, it was the two “sons” – the one obedient despite himself, the other *seemingly* obedient but in fact not so. Last week, it was the “wicked tenants” in the vineyard – and the implicit “good tenants” whom even the Jewish elders realise are those who yield true fruit for the Father. And then there is today’s parable – the contrast of those “invited” to the marriage feast but who refuse to come, and those who are “gathered” at the last minute, whether good or bad, and who get to eat the banquet. They are strange little stories, and they come in a strange place in the development of Matthew’s portrait of the Lord.

Basically, too, alongside the shared theme of “paired contrast”, all three share a common meaning. God wants action, not lip-service. God wants the *doing*, not the *saying* of obedience. God wants us to bear fruit for the kingdom, wants us to actually *share* his banquet, not just accept the invitation and then do our own thing. In many ways, it is as simple as that. But I think there is more to it.

When Jesus first told these stories, he told them – as mentioned already – in an atmosphere of growing antipathy between himself and the Jewish authorities, the Scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees. In that context, one can perhaps hear a note of frustration creeping into his voice. He tells them the parables, he asks them for their opinion, they always give the “right answer” – but yet they do nothing to change, unlike the tax collectors and prostitutes who repented, unlike the “common folk” who reckon Jesus a prophet. It is almost as if he is giving them last chance after last chance, asking them to remember who they are as God’s chosen people, and what has been promised them by God. And yet they still do nothing – except for becoming increasingly angry. In last week’s gospel of the “tenants”, Jesus reminded them that Israel is the “vineyard of the Lord” – his planting, the “vine” he had nurtured in Egypt, in Sinai, in Canaan – yet they were not bearing fruit. In today’s gospel, paired with that first reading from Isaiah, he reminds them again that they are the people of God – a people invited to the true, messianic banquet, a banquet not only of rich food and fine wine, but a banquet which celebrates God’s ultimate triumph over sin and death, celebrates his action as their saviour, taking away their shame, celebrates the one in whom they should rejoice. Yet still they do not see it. They *hear* the invitation, they seem to have *accepted* the invitation, but they do not come when all is ready – so many other things seem more important. It is so tempting to see the Jewish leaders as bad people, people with whom Jesus is angry, people Jesus simply condemns. Yet there is another way of hearing his words. It is as if Jesus is talking with a stroppy teenage son or daughter, and getting more exasperated as he does so. He tries and tries to make them see that there is another way, a way of understanding God’s plan which would give them life and make them happy – yet they are convinced of their own rectitude, stuck in that “black and white” mode of self-belief so common in teenagers (and others!), and will not budge. Yet still Jesus tries and tries – not because he is angry, but because he loves them, no matter how exasperating they are.

And implicit in all these stories is another, more shadowy people. Implicit in all these stories are the ones who *will* listen. Implicit in all these stories are the Gentiles, the pagans, and that is perhaps strangest of all. Matthew is not renowned for his favourable attitude towards the Gentiles, at least when compared with Mark and Luke. Earlier, he suggests that those of the community accused of sin and refusing to be reconciled should be treated “like tax collectors or pagans” – that is, at least in the literal sense, they should be shunned and cast out. That’s what Matthew thinks of the pagans. Yet behind each of these stories stand the Gentiles – the older boy in the first story, who though seemingly disobedient eventually comes to his senses and does the Father’s will. There are the Gentiles – the “new tenants” who *will* bear fruit for the Kingdom, and do not, unlike the Jews of history, kill all the prophets and eventually God’s Son. There are the Gentiles – those plucked from the roads and byways, good and bad alike – who eventually come to the banquet. Matthew may not be terribly keen on the “Gentile mission”, but behind these three stories there they are, and there, too, are *we*.

Now, none of that is particularly original – you will, I am sure, have heard it many times before. And yet, it is important for us to hear it again. It is important for two quite different reasons. In the first place, I suspect we easily forget just what a miracle it is that we have received God’s grace at all, we who do not belong to that *first* “chosen people”. We, those dragged from hedges and byways, from the ends of the earth into the banquet of the Kingdom, could never have deserved an invitation. And yet, so wide is God’s mercy, so deep is Christ’s love, that he has given his life for us, and made us sharers in that messianic table. Too often, I think, we can forget how amazing that is.

Equally though, I suspect that we too always need reminding of the risk of our becoming “sclerotic”, hardened, fossilised in our faith. There is always a risk for us, perhaps most especially for us who are “professional religious”, that we assume we know God, we assume we know his plan, we assume we are bearing His fruit – just as did the Scribes and Pharisees. We assume we know the answers – theological, catechetical, liturgical – and so we stop listening to Jesus as he tries to show us that the mystery of God is so much deeper, so much more unexpected, so much more alive than we can ever understand. We stop looking for God, we stop looking for the Kingdom, we stop listening to Christ, because we think we’ve “got it taped”. Well, today, Jesus asks us to open our eyes again, to see the path of discipleship he sets before us – and he asks us in all the exasperation of love for a stroppy teen; not out of anger, but from compassion, that we might have life, and have it to the full.

It is no surprise, perhaps, that St Benedict too recognises our tendency to become “comfortable” in our faith, too “settled” in what we feel we understand of the mystery of God and of salvation. Every day of our monastic life we begin in the same way, with the public recitation of Ps.94, the *“Venite”* – a custom borrowed from the Rule by the Roman Office. Every single day of our monastic life, we hear the same words: *O that today, you would listen to his Voice: harden not your hearts*. Every day of our lives we are called again to listen, to listen like disciples, that is, those who still have something to learn, to listen with the ear of our hearts. Every day we are called to listen to his Voice – not to assume that we already know *what* he is going to say to us.

If, then, we are to be those who, good or bad, do indeed enjoy that banquet which the King has dragged us to, we must listen – intently, actively, lovingly. If we do not, then – as in psalm 94 – God will not let us enter his rest, for our hearts will be not be ready to receive his gifts. If we do not listen, then perhaps we too, like the character in the gospel, will not hear the “dress code” for the banquet, will not hear what we must wear to share in the table of the Lord. In our ordinary lives, we would never dream of turning up badly dressed to a wedding, or even a “formal”. The Lord deserves just that little bit more. We must be those who are clothed, through God’s grace, in the garments of salvation, covered by Him in the robe of righteousness (Is.61:10), that we may fulfil the words of today’s opening prayer, and always be determined to carry out His good works. Amen.