

Sermon on Sunday 15 October 2023

by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

When Jesus came to Lemsbury

(Matthew 22. 1 -14)

The wedding feast of the heir to the throne! We haven't had a royal wedding for a few years now, but we have had a Coronation this year! And that threw up a lot of the same questions we've just heard about in Matthew. Who's going to be there, who's going to get an invitation? Will **SHE** accept it? And what would the dress code be for certain troublesome princes?

The great banquet, especially the wedding feast, is a familiar symbol in our Bibles, for the time when God will come and rule in glory and justice among his people. In our Old Testament reading, the prophet Isaiah proclaims a banquet for all the Nations of the World. In the Gospel story, Jesus speaks of the people who seemed to be right at the top of God's invitation list, but when the party was ready to begin, they were too busy with their own daily preoccupations, and didn't go!

So, instead the invitation went out to everyone, 'the good and the bad', the people who would never have imagined the King would want their company, and they come to the party instead.

Then there's that puzzling footnote about the man who arrives at the party in the wrong clothes – and gets thrown outside into the dark.

But parables are no fun if they are just old stories – we have to be able to find ourselves in them as well. So, here's a retelling of the parable for our own age. It's not about St Andrew's / St Mary's, but you may find some people you recognise ... you might even recognise yourself.

It began with a letter that turned up at the sorting office one Summer. To the Church, Lemsbury. No address, no postcode, just 'the Church'. Who was it for? There were 14 churches in Lemsbury. As the post office was still an office under the crown, rather like the Church of England, the letter soon found its way to the Vicar of St Luke's.

The Vicar of St Luke's opened the letter. It didn't take long to read. Just a handwritten note: 'Coming back very soon, keep your diary clear – yours faithfully, J.C.' The Vicar was troubled. What could it mean.

Then another letter arrived. Same address, same handwriting; To the Church, Lemsbury. 'See you all third Sunday in October. Your place, but my party. Yours in Glory, JC'. All sorts of feelings gripped the Vicar. Mystery – excitement – panic, so she called a special meeting of Churches Together to discuss it with the other denominations in town. Was it true, was Jesus coming? Or was it a strange hoax? There was some lively debate. Surely Jesus will come like a thief in the night... he won't send a postcard telling us when? Or was it a clever double bluff?

But after much discussion and even some prayer and reflection on the scriptures, they agreed that whatever was happening, the Church is commanded to be ready. There would be no foolish virgins in Lemsbury. The timing wasn't very convenient, so soon after Harvest Festival, but at least he wasn't planning to come in Advent. The Churches were all for too busy getting ready for Christmas to worry about Jesus turning up on earth. Only Mr Tanner of the Four Square Gospel Mission objected. His studies of the prophet Daniel clearly revealed that Jesus would return in August 2029, so he and his congregation would have nothing to do with it.

But how should they prepare? Well, they'd better have a special service to welcome the returning Christ. Fine in principle, but

where – and how? The vicar of St Luke's invited everyone to a splendid choral Eucharist, as St Luke's was the biggest place in town and had the best choir, but the Evangelicals from St Dunstan's wanted something more low church and biblical, the Methodists preferred a special 'Hymns of Praise', the RCs wanted a full rite of confession and absolution.

So, in the finest Christian tradition of tolerance, they all decided to worship separately that Sunday and all get together afterwards for lunch on neutral ground. If Jesus was early, he could choose for himself where to go to Church, and could see all his faithful followers at the party afterwards. So, the large function rooms at Lemsbury Civic Hall were hired, the formidable Churches Together catering committee swung into action and the choir at St Luke's washed their surplices (they would not get caught without their proper party clothes) and planned extra rehearsals.

The third Sunday in October dawned bright and fair. The choir at St Luke's sang the liturgy beautifully, the Methodist congregation sang their hearts out, the vicar of St Dunstan's preached thunderously on damnation from on his favourite text from Revelations, and Mr Tanner at the Mission preached on Daniel for the ninth time since Trinity... and they were all so happy doing what they liked doing that they really weren't at all concerned that Jesus hadn't turned up at their service.

But later, as they made their way across town to the Civic Hall, they began to notice that somehow, something wasn't quite going to plan. The town centre, usually so quiet before lunch on Sunday, was strangely lively, bright and buzzing. Something was going on.

It had started very early on Sunday morning. A young single mum, out with her toddlers at the playground on the old council estate, had fallen into conversation with a cheerful, helpful young man... and had felt all her exhaustion and anxiety and isolation melt at his simple call, 'Follow me!'.

In a bedsit off Station Road a young man felt he had hardly got to bed when was woken by a shout below from the street. Fighting his blinding hangover he struggled to the window. 'Joe, forget the night before, you're invited to a proper party this morning. Follow me, Oh, and bring that guitar, I'm going to teach you some new songs'. And for the first time in many months the dawning of a new day filled Joe with joy and hope.

In the park, the Lemsbury Sunday League derby between the Royal Oak and the Railway Arms was reaching a tense and bad-tempered climax when a young man walked on to the pitch and blew a whistle. 'This game is over, a new game starts now. And you're all winners' he cried, 'now follow me'.

The staff were arriving at the Taj Mahal in the High Street, to get ready for the Sunday lunchtime shift, anxiously eying the growing crowd and muttering to each other in Bengali. 'Leave that, today you will be cooking a feast for the Son of God. Follow me,' and the bold young man swept them along into the heart of the crowd. Perhaps for the first time, they began to feel that they were welcome here.

On the square opposite the Civic Hall the party was in full swing, everyone seemed to have food and music to share – but not just there, it was everywhere, and everyone had their own story to tell of the young stranger who called them to follow him. But the gathering inside the Hall seemed to be enjoying their lunch on their own, when the young man swept through to door. 'Hi everyone – you all have been waiting a long time for me, haven't you? Thank you. I've really valued that. Nice place this, but nothing like big enough for all my guests. And I don't want to intrude when you're having fun, but there's another party going on just outside if you want to join us, just - follow me. And after a few moments of slightly embarrassed silence, joyous smiles came over their faces, they all went out and joined the crowd.

Oh, Jesus did pop in to one Church that morning. He arrived at the Gospel Mission just at the climax of Mr Tanner's sermon predicting Christ's return in 2029! I last saw Mr Tanner dancing to a Bengali song with the Roman Catholic Priest... even Mr Tanner had found his party clothes.