

'This is the gospel of the Lord' – the good news – quite something to have to accept about a reading with the level of violent imagery we've just heard. It's the latest in a series of really challenging passages from Matthew's Gospel that have been set for the last few Sundays.

At all sorts of levels our response to each of these parables could be, 'That's just not right!'

And indeed that's Matthew's point. There is something not right. Yet Matthew, faithful Jew that he is, believes God to be alright and the gospel to boil down to 'everything will be alright'.

In the NT this idea of 'rightness' is communicated by a group of words based on the noun *dikaioσunē*. This is sometimes translated 'justice' and sometimes 'righteousness.'

The 'justice' word sits quite easily with Luke who sees Jesus' life and teaching on the kingdom as communicating a message of what we would recognize as social justice: fair shares for all, levelling up, inclusiveness. Luke witnessed this inclusiveness in the way that Gentiles, together with Jews on the margins and slaves were embracing and finding a welcome in the Christian faith. As a Hellenistic Jew who was comfortable in Graeco-Roman society he delighted in the conversion of Gentiles. In the Book of Acts he charts a relentless shift in the centre of gravity of the early church from Jerusalem to Rome.

For Matthew on the other hand, the word 'righteousness' seems to be a better fit.

For him the emphasis is on personal holiness of life:

'Blessed are they that hunger and thirst for righteousness' sake.'

'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.'

Matthew was probably a Palestinian Jew and certainly trained as a rabbi. He too saw the marginal Jews and the Gentiles turning to Christ, but he felt much more acutely than Luke, the rejection of Jesus by the elite Jewish leaders. For this was his home culture, the very people who should have known better – the equivalent to our Archbishops and Bishops who in Matthew's distinctive language turn out so disappointingly to be 'blind guides'.

In these last few weeks we have heard Matthew's retelling and elaboration of a group of Jesus' parables. They take the form of laments on these blind guides' refusal of God's gracious invitation to the banquet: they carry a mix of frustration, grief, and rage. Matthew is at a point where he and his community of Jewish Christians have to face the painful fact that there is no going back and that their 'new normal' will be outside of their cradle religion. So in today's parable he literally says, 'Go to hell!' and includes his brutal signature phrase of 'wailing and gnashing of teeth.' 'You had your chance, and now you've blown it.' This is of course the same message as the parable of the tenants in the vineyard that Peter preached on last week.

But something else is troubling Matthew and his community. The people who have accepted the invitation to the banquet, who have taken over the tenancy of the vineyard don't look very promising, they don't look righteous. At least you know where you are with your own people – better the devil you know; but these are a motley crew of strangers and foreigners, probably with mixed motives, some coming out of desperation to seek asylum in the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps this may help us see where Matthew is coming from. Imagine that the Church of England hierarchy rejected Jesus' invitation to the banquet but the inhabitants of the erstwhile Calais jungle accepted it with open arms. We just might have some misgivings.

Granted, many of these folk might turn out to be enriching to the community in all sorts of wonderful and unexpected ways, but some will inevitably be freeloaders, some might be criminals, even terrorists. How could we tell? Just letting them all in can't be right – can it?

This is why Matthew talks here about the slaves gathering 'both good and bad' and earlier in the gospel about wheat and tares, and good and bad fish caught in a net; and thinking back to even earlier this summer in Ross' wonderful telling of the story of the sower, of the haphazard, extravagant scattering of seed on good soil and bad.

How can that be right?

Matthew reflects on this from several angles. The first is to observe that, like the process of planting seeds and waiting for harvest, this is a long game; you shouldn't judge by appearances because people are ultimately known by their fruit. Meanwhile his Gospel sensibly sets out some rules for managing a situation where there may be – to mix metaphors - some rotten apples in your community, whether these be natives or incomers. His focus on safeguarding is something that we need to return to afresh in the light of the report on child sexual abuse in the Church of England published this week.

Matthew also repeatedly insists that – as we regularly affirm in the creeds – ultimately everyone will be judged by God, the good separated from the bad and all made right in the end.

Finally in the very odd twist at the end of today's parable he introduces the idea of that judgement being based on what you are wearing.

Again, this can't be right can it? After so generously inviting everyone to the party are we seriously expected to believe that God will turn around and expel somebody for not sporting the correct outfit?

Here, as so often, Paul steps in to help us. He was both a Pharisee and a Roman citizen and so he could connect with both sides of the issue.

Around AD55 he wrote to the Christian community in Rome, a community made up of Jews and Gentiles, and his aim was to reassure them all that things really were alright because God is a God of righteousness and justice.

Basically what Paul said was this: As Hugh reminded us in his sermon a couple of weeks ago, God is infinitely extravagant in his kindness and mercy, welcoming into the kingdom all people regardless of race, tribe, social status, culture, sex, or personal baggage.

But God isn't stupid. Paul asks a question of those who would take advantage of God:

do you despise the riches of [God's] kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

We need to live up to our calling, to justify God's faith in us. You don't have to meet some standard to be invited to the party but once you're there you do need to grow into the person God wants you to be.

Elsewhere Paul writes:

...beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience...Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Perhaps this is the wedding robe in the parable.

But where are we to get such garments? Are we doomed to be plagued throughout our lives by the worry that we aren't well-dressed enough for God?

It's here that Paul offers a new idea. He argues that, just as in the story of the prodigal son it is God who invites us to the party and it is God who provides the robe – a robe purchased with his blood. That party invitation needs to be justified but God does that himself (something Paul refers to

as *dikaiōsis*) God welcomes us in and makes us worthy of that welcome by clothing us in righteousness. What's more it starts now. All we have to do is – as it were - put on the robe; respond in good faith; refuse to be held back by fear or shame.

I could say a lot more about this – and there is a lot more to be worked through. But instead I'm going to finish with the words of someone who has expressed Paul's thinking better than I ever could - George Herbert:

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lacked anything.

"A guest," I answered, "worthy to be here":
 Love said, "You shall be he."
"I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
 I cannot look on thee."
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
 "Who made the eyes but I?"

"Truth, Lord; but I have marred them; let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve."

"And know you not" says Love, "who bore the blame?"
 "My dear, then I will serve."

"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."
 So I did sit and eat.