



***Feast fit for all***  
**Reverend Judith Wigglesworth**  
**28th Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**15 October 2017**  
***Isaiah 25:1-9***  
***Philippians 4:1-9***  
***Matthew 2:1-14***

Welcome to the banquet table!

We seem to have a feast of banquet tables in our readings this morning.  
And here's another kind of banquet...



Hobbits are described in the Prologue to *The Lord of the Rings* as:

*“an unobtrusive but very ancient people: they love peace and quiet and good tilled*

*earth....They are quick of hearing and sharp-eyed, and though they are inclined to be fat and do not hurry unnecessarily, they are nonetheless deft in their movements.... As for the hobbits of the Shire...their faces were as a rule good-natured rather than beautiful. Broad, bright-eyed, red-cheeked, with mouths apt to laughter, and to eating and drinking. And laugh they did, and eat, and drink, often and heartily, being fond of simple jests at all times, and of six meals a day (when they could get them). They were hospitable and delighted in parties, and in presents, which they gave away freely and eagerly accepted.”*

So much for hobbits - it sounds like a lot of feasting!

In our first reading, God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, spreads before us a picture of the kingdom of God as a great feast:

*“On this mountain the LORD of Hosts will prepare a banquet of rich fare for all the peoples, a banquet of wines well matured, richest fare and well-matured wines strained clear.”*

So who is welcome at this sort of feast?

According to Matthew’s account of the parable of the banquet, it’s a bit complicated. First, there are invited guests – but they refuse to come. They had other things to do, and what’s more, they end up rejecting and even killing the servants who come to invite them. So the king sends more servants, saying: *“ ‘Go out therefore to the main thoroughfares, and invite everyone you can find to the wedding’. The servants went out the streets, and collected everyone they could find, good and bad alike. So the hall was packed with guests.”*

All good. The wedding banquet can go ahead, the hall is full. A delightful mix of all-comers from all over the place have been invited to come and see, come and eat. Perhaps they are the tax collectors, the blind, the lame, the riff raff from the worst parts of town, all those who thought they’d been forgotten. Let the celebration begin!

But not quite. There’s a sting in the tail of this parable. Because it turns out that one guest has arrived wearing the wrong attire for a wedding, so is kicked out. Doesn’t that seem a bit over the top? Isn’t being sent out into the dark, to the place of wailing and gnashing of teeth, a bit harsh, for not having the right clothes? Does this mean that everyone’s invited, but not everyone can stay?

Let’s look a bit more at the layers of this parable to see what we find.

Jesus uses stories of familiar events of the time to get across a message with a much deeper meaning. In this case Jesus is speaking to the political and religious leaders of the time: the ones who ask him curly questions and challenge him; the ones who struggle to accept Jesus’ authority to preach God’s good news. What and who could the events and characters of this parable symbolise?

We can take the cue from our Isaiah reading this morning, and from the words of Jesus himself, as he describes the *banquet* as God's kingdom. Jesus has been sent by God (*the king*) to usher in the kingdom of God in a new way, to help people experience God in a fresh way. God's prophets and messengers (*the servants*), equipped to preach the Christian gospel, are sent out with the invitations to this kingdom banquet. But they are rejected and punished by the political and religious leaders of the time (the original *guests*), who are not convinced by Jesus' message and are not willing to come to this banquet. Others though, **are** open to this new invitation to experience God's love. The gospel is preached further afield, beyond the Jewish people to the Gentiles - people from all over the place, *everyone they could find* from all levels of society and all walks of life. They get to be invited, they say yes, and they gather at the banquet table.

So this parable, like others in Matthew's gospel, can be seen as portraying the Jewish rejection of Christian messengers, who bring a new invitation to God's kingdom through the person of Jesus. Jesus' listeners, the chief priests and the Pharisees – the political and religious leaders of the time who rejected this new invitation to God's kingdom – are being challenged by Jesus to spot where they fit into the story..... And yes, they're the ones that "shoot the messenger". And in the meantime, others get to enjoy the banquet and sit at the table with Jesus.

Wouldn't it be much simpler if the parable ended here on a high note - with the hall packed full of the new guests, buzzing with excitement about being invited to the wonderful feast. A banquet of radical inclusiveness and extreme generosity to groups of people hitherto excluded from God's kingdom.

But it doesn't. And that's because this parable challenges not only the chief priests and Pharisees (for their rejection of the invitation). The parable also challenges the Christian hearers of the parable – then and now – the very people who are invited afresh to the banquet to sit with Jesus. And that's because being invited to the banquet table is a two-way thing. Coming to God's banquet table described by Jesus is not only to receive the fruit - "the banquet of rich fare and well matured wines" - but also to go and **bear** the fruit. Being willing to put on the "*wedding clothes*" in this parable symbolises being willing to grow and be transformed and be changed by encountering God, and to go and show forth the fruits of the kingdom.

In the latest issue of *Taonga* is an article called *Welcoming the Holy Guest*. The author, Adrienne Thompson, reflects on the experience of a mixed bunch from her church visiting the Ngatiawa community near Waikanae and enjoying their generous hospitality. She writes:

*Hospitality is relationship. Hospitality begins with God the host, God who welcomes me in. ...In the gospels, people are always eating, it seems, calling in their neighbours, feasting with friends, and of course inviting the wandering rabbi and his motley bunch of followers to join them. ... As I live in God's welcome, hospitality becomes a way of life, and mysteriously God my host is also God my guest".*<sup>1</sup>

We are all invited to the banquet table, we are all welcomed into God's embrace – each and every one of us. Yet we are also compelled to create space within ourselves to welcome God **in** to our very heart. *God is my host and God is my guest*. God's kingdom is a kingdom in which love and justice and truth and mercy and holiness reign unhindered. These are the clothes we need to wear for the wedding. These are the fruits of two-way hospitality we are called into with God.

So may we like hobbits *"be hospitable and delighted in parties..."!*

Please, help yourselves to this morning's banquet feast – take away some fruit of God's banquet to share with others. Take away some fruit of God's banquet to remind yourself that *"mysteriously, God my host is also God my guest"*.

And finally, in Paul's words to the Philippians:

*<sup>9</sup>Put into practice the lessons I taught you, the tradition I have passed on, all that you heard me say or saw me do; and the God of peace will be with you.*

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> *Anglican Taonga*, Spring 2015, No. 55.