

Sermon, Trinity XX...

People keep asking me for some Bible study. Right, let's do some. Today's is the puzzling gospel about someone who came to a wedding without the proper wedding garment. Well, I've solemnised a few hundred weddings in my time and I think I know what St Matthew is getting at. As Alan Bennett might say *You see some sights*. I've stood outside many a Saturday in January and counted the goose pimples on the bride's back. And some of the visions you see from the front put me in mind of Mozart's comment on the near undress of his piano pupil Elizabeth von Auernhammer. This more than ample specimen used to chase him round the piano. Mozart said *Tartar is the only remedy*.

St Matthew says nothing about the bride and groom in this gospel. It's the guests who cause the problem. And so it is today. I once had a bride's sister-in-law come in half-dressed in something pink, dragging an ankle tattoo and so glued to her mobile phone that she tripped over the base of the font and squeaked some very unchurchy words. And then I walked in on a Saturday morning to find a friend of the groom roaming around the chancel holding the lead to a tape recorder. *Ere, mate* he said, in the usual manner for addressing the clergy, *where do I stick this?* And, thank God, I was able to tell him exactly where to stick it.

Our churchwarden emeritus Jack Woodhead, ninety-eight this year, complained to me about this gospel. Jack said, *A chap's dragged in off the street to a wedding without so much as a by your leave. Then he's cast into outer darkness because he hasn't got the right suit on. Who does go round the streets in his morning suit – on the off chance he's asked to a wedding?*

This parable of Our Lord is extreme – because the call to faith is extreme. The Christian religion cannot be a part-time affair. I was in a church in deepest Sussex this week where the people behaved as if they were playing dolls' house. It was all so neat and pretty – and very respectable - but the distinct and abiding impression was of something that provided a refined and nostalgic interlude between cocktails and the customary four at Bridge.

This is what those invited are like in today's parable. They make light of it and go away – one to his farm, another to his merchandise. In other words, they turned down the King's wedding invitation because they had better things to do. Now in the parable we are meant to understand that God is the King and we are the ones invited. There's nothing sentimentally pious about this. Attending to God does not mean spending all your time in church, hymn-singing or going to synods. Some people feel good about themselves when they do these things. They are the holy Joes forever busying themselves with a churchy form of playing dolls' house.

That's not what God is inviting you to. And attending to God is not even being good. Listen again to today's gospel. *They gathered together all, as many as they found, both bad and good*. You know, it's the odd line like that which makes me think that when Our Lord was not saving the world from its sins, he could have done very well moonlighting as a stand up comedian. The guests were dragged in off the street

indiscriminately. Imagine the scene then at the top table with Auntie Ermintrude stuck between two lads just back from an afternoon up the Arsenal!

But this is what the Christian life must be like. Like *The News of the World*, all human life is there. It's not just for the nice people. In fact Our Lord is very explicit: the faith is for sinners only. And the Divine Grace is not Brownie points for doing churchy things. So what is the true nature of God's invitation and why was the man without the wedding garment thrown into outer darkness?

There is a clue in the Prayer Book settings for today. The compilers of the Prayer Book have made a theme of it and it is there in the Collect, in the Epistle and in the Gospel. The Collect prays *that we being ready*. The Epistle talks of *redeeming the time*. And in the Gospel that wedding guest is excluded because he is not ready. The invitation of God therefore is for readiness. It is urgent. Crucial. We must not be like those who turned down the invitation because they had something better to do. Our relationship with God is always one of crisis. It is immediate every moment. You are being called to the wedding *now*. *Now is the acceptable time. Today is the day of salvation.*

It is the call to God-consciousness. We are called to live the practice of the presence of God. It might mean praying explicitly in words and thoughts. It can and does mean a specific act of devotion such as a genuflection, kneeling at the altar to receive the Sacrament or saying the Rosary, contemplating the Crucifix. It is all those things and something more. It is living our lives with God as our context and point of reference.

You can cultivate and encourage this sense of context and presence. When I was down in deepest Sussex at that country church I had a quarter of an hour to wait before I gave my talk. I sat out in the churchyard and – no doubt because my usual context is the noise and traffic of the City – I felt the intense silence almost as if it were a weight. It was one of those rare utterly motionless days when the leaves on the tall trees were so still they might have been on a photograph. The leaves in their mature colours like old ladies in their tattered finery.

In a country churchyard on an autumn day like that, a quarter of an hour can be a perfect evocation of timelessness, of eternity. The smoke from a single chimney rising straight up. In a rare moment like that, in such surrounding loveliness, silent intensity, it is easy to feel the sense of God's presence. The challenge, the invitation, is to cultivate this sense all the time – to live with an awareness of the nearness of God. To live and breathe in the presence of God as I lived and breathed the atmosphere in that churchyard

But it is not realistic to be thinking about God all the time. There *are* farms to look after and merchandise to buy and sell. But you should find regular spells in the day when you can set aside a few minutes just deliberately to put yourself in God's presence, to practise the presence. And you should certainly start and end the day in prayer. Sir John Astley prayed before the charge at the Battle of Edgehill: *Thou knowest O Lord that I have much to do this day. If I forget Thee, do thou not forget me*. And so the presence of God should be the constant backdrop to your life. Your default position. Your screen-saver. God is the place to which you return heart and mind every day.

Now there's a sting in the tail. I was really puzzled. Why didn't the King's servants notice that the bloke they fetched in wasn't wearing a wedding garment? Then it dawned on me. The wedding garment is of course the right intention, the disposition of the heart. And God the King alone sees into the heart. Be ready in your heart then. Properly dressed, so to speak. And remember there will be a day when we shall be finally called from the farm, the merchandise, the garden, the street, even from our beds. Come in number seven your time's up. Come and give an account of yourself. You will be asked. Be ready. For many are called but few chosen.