18th Sunday after Trinity (Year A)

'Improperly dressed'

I wonder if you have ever been invited to a special event and been unsure of what to wear? As some of us have found out the hard way, it can be somewhat embarrassing to turn up to a party inappropriately dressed. I well remember hearing about a friend who many years ago hosted a toga party and one of his guests turned up dressed as a pirate! Some events are easier than others; for example, it would be entirely appropriate to attend a friend's barbeque on a hot summer's evening in a t-shirt and shorts whereas to wear these to a formal occasion might cause some raised eyebrows and possibly insult the host and embarrass other guests. So we would do well to read any invitation carefully and if in doubt ask the host.

At the beginning of the year I received an unexpected invitation to attend a reception and dinner at St James Palace hosted by the Princess Royal. The dress code was made quite clear on the invitation card – black tie with miniatures. It would have been inappropriate to deviate, as I would be in the presence of royalty. On arrival I joined the long queue of guests and presented my invitation card along with proof of ID to a courtier before being admitted. As I looked around everyone appeared to have adhered to the dress code with one notably exception; I was greatly amused to see an eccentric elderly man who, apparently hadn't read the dress code and was wearing garish tartan trues and a brown tweed cloth cap! It would have been all too easy for me to pre-judge this man without knowing more about him. For I knew the invited guests included many extremely brave men and women; individuals who had selflessly risked their lives for their country; it was highly likely that this man had too. This was confirmed when he was presented to the Princess Royal and she didn't batter an eyebrow at his appearance – it wasn't his outward appearance that really mattered, it was what was inside - his character.

Today's gospel follows on from last week and is entitled: 'The Parable of the Wedding Banquet'. The same parable can also be found in Luke 14: 15-24) but with a slightly different emphasis. Jesus' parable was originally directed as a critique of Israel's religious leaders such as the Pharisees who had rejected Jesus and his invitation to enter the

kingdom of heaven. It plays heavily on the First Century concept of honour and shame.

The Pharisees considered themselves above reproach and were proud of their strict adherence to the Jewish law and rituals. As the gospels make clear, they were quick to criticise anyone who failed to meet their exacting standards.
Jesus' parable describes a king (God) who hosted a lavish wedding banquet with plentiful food and drink. He sends out invitations to selected guests via his emissaries who they dismiss and kill the king's messengers. The enraged king has the city burned (22:7) and instead offers an open invitation to all, both good and bad. In Luke's account the invitation was extended to the poor, crippled, blind and lame (Luke 14:21). There were so many guests that that the wedding hall was full. However, amongst the guests the king notices one who has snuck in not wearing the correct form of dress and has him thrown out.

Like many of Jesus' parables it raises many questions some that are unanswerable. However, it certainly makes the hearer think. For example, how could anyone pulled in off the street to attend a royal banquet be expected to be wearing or afford the correct outfit? Why was the guest rendered speechless? Was it guilt? What does the wedding robe represent? How might we interpret the parable in a 21st Century context?

It was traditional for the host to provide garments for their wedding guests to wear. These would have been simple and non-descript so that everyone was dressed the same irrespective of rank or social position. For a guest to deliberately choose not to wear the designated garment would have been a gross insult and if the host were a king –possibly a treasonable offence.

One way of interpreting the parable might be to see the garments as representing a person's inner character – their heart and intentions rather than their outward appearance. For we know that Jesus never judged people for their dress sense or social status. Rather his criticism was saved for the hypocritical Jewish religious leaders.

Jesus made it clear that no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they have undergone an inner transformation; what he described as being born again. A person might look outwardly religious and like

the Pharisees adhere to the minutiae of the religious law but unless they have been changed inwardly they cannot enter the kingdom of God.

A changed heart will result in changed behaviour. It was John Calvin who said that faith cannot be separated from good works. We need to be renewed by the Holy Spirit and put off the old man.

Paul in his letter to the church in Philippi wrote to encourage and strengthen the Christians there who striving to live out the Christian life. He singled out in particular two loyal Christian women who were struggling alongside him in proclaiming the kingdom of Christ. He describes them as his 'co-workers, whose names are in the book of life' (4:3). In effect, their names were on God the King's invitation list. He encouraged them to allow God's character to shine forth in their lives specifically their gentleness (4:4).

Each one of us has received a royal invitation to enter the kingdom of heaven. Have you responded? Is your name on the invitation list? God calls each one of us whose names are written in the 'book of life' to put on Christ's garments and let his character shine forth in our lives. So as fellow citizens of the kingdom of heaven, let us all continue to strive to do so. Amen.

Rev. Andrew Jacobson
11th October 2020