

11th October 2020 6pm Come and Rejoice in the Lord

Sermon by Rob Latham, Bible readings by Emma Latham and John Wild

This transcript is only of the Bible readings and the sermon.

First Reading: Philippians 4:1-8 [NIV 1984]

1 Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!

2 I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. **3** Yes, and I ask you, loyal yoke-fellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! **5** Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. **6** Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. **7** And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Second Reading: Matthew 22:1-14 [NIVUSA]

The parable of the wedding banquet

1 Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: **2** ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. **3** He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.

4 ‘Then he sent some more servants and said, “Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.”

5 ‘But they paid no attention and went off – one to his field, another to his business. **6** The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. **7** The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

8 ‘Then he said to his servants, “The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. **9** So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.” **10** So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

11 ‘But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. **12** He asked, “How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?” The man was speechless.

13 ‘Then the king told the attendants, “Tie his hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

14 ‘For many are invited, but few are chosen.’

This is the word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Sermon

[Rob Latham:]

Let us pray.

May I speak in the Name of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Isn't it lovely to be back [in the church building]? I don't know about you, I certainly had a very interesting time the first time I was invited to speak at an evening pre-recorded session that I remember recording at home using my laptop. And I first had to be told that there was a camera facility on the laptop in the first place. And then the first one passed by reasonably well, I was ever so pleased. But I have to say recording the second one always seemed to go on forever and ever and ever. Because every time I made a mistake, it was delete, record, go back. [sigh]. And not a happy scenario. Until I had the confidence, I discovered that if I actually recorded the whole lot all together, it could be sent in one big batch rather than little tiny bits like I thought it had to go. So it's really good to be back because I kind of feel I can get back to the way I normally do things.

I'd like to tell you about my New Testament lectures at the Queens College in Birmingham, from 1982 to 1984. I was actually at Queens College until 1985. But I think it was only the first two years that we actually specifically had New Testament lectures. And frankly, to be honest, although I'm a great lover of the Bible, I don't think we got on very well. And I don't think I learned a great deal. Our lecturer was a lovely guy in many senses, but he got his own hobby horses and bees in his bonnet. And he seemed to be more keen on describing all these things to us rather than actually getting down into the nitty gritty and actually teaching us what the New Testament actually says. But I did learn one thing. And that was about *chiasms*. Would anybody here like to venture what they think a chiasm is? Right? Okay. No, I didn't think that will be the case. So let me explain. You know when you go on holiday, or maybe a day out, you obviously go on a route that you kind-of designate as the way to go, and you pass all the landmarks if it's a familiar place you've been to before, you pass all the landmarks on the way. And then on the way back, you're doing that in reverse. So you pass all the landmarks. I remember, for instance, going to Mablethorpe on the Sunday School outing. And as you go on the way towards Mablethorpe, the way we went, which was from a place called Rothley, in Leicestershire, where I was born, you actually go on the A46 to Lincoln, and about sort of 15 miles away, you'd see Lincoln because it was a very distinct ridge, with a gap in the middle. And the gap in the middle is called the Witham gap because below that flows the river Witham. And there are other landmarks on the journey and then of course you'd look for it on the way back. Well, that's pretty much what a chiasm is. A chiasm is a way of writing so that you set out what you want to say to get to the main point of your argument. And then you say your conclusions in equivalent styling on the way back to the point where you want to finish. So you've got a kind of triangle effect, I suppose, but in prose, from what you've been writing in your letter. It's all designed apparently so that there's a kind of way of showing what your main point is. And this exciting thing with chiasms was that you could spot the bits of the argument that actually matched up to each other on the way into the middle of the book and then on the way out. Is that kind-of clear? I'm still trying to understand it myself, to be honest. But that's broadly what a chiasm is.

And the reason why I'm telling you about chiasms is because I think that there's something I said, when I was online, in my last sermon or sermon before (last sermon online!), I talked about, that this really does feel like Paul's swan

song to the world, that he's anticipating at the beginning of his letter to the Philippians, that he won't be long before he shuffles off his mortal coil. And I cited various things, particularly that sort of sense in which he talks about, "I don't really know whether I'd like to go to Heaven and be with the Lord, or whether I'd like to come and see you. But whatever the Lord pleases, I'm really happy." But as you come towards the end of Philippians, as we have it here, as Emma read for us this evening, you've got that same sort of feel, that there is this idea that Paul is kind-of signing off. We've no idea precisely when he died in relationship to writing the letter. So he may have had a number of more years after this and did visit the Philippians in their church. But you kind-of feel that there are some things which he says like, for instance, here in verse 4,

4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice! 5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything,...

And "finally, brothers, ..." this is another one in verse 8:

8 Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.

It kind-of just has that feel that Paul is just laying down these encouragements as one who is departing and leaving for better things, for those who are running behind, but commending these things to them, is actually encouraging them in a way that he won't be able to at a future date, and giving them all sorts of reassurances in that process.

Now, I like to think that that's really very appropriate when we come to what John's read for us from the Gospel of Matthew. It's perhaps, hopefully for most of us, a familiar story. It's a parable in which Jesus sees that there is to be a great feast. He's preparing a banquet for his son, the king is inviting hosts and hordes of people to come and gather in his presence to celebrate the wedding of his son. Of course, we can project that forward to our understanding of Scripture that at the end of time, there is to be a wedding feast, when the Lamb, our Lord Jesus Christ, will be married to his bride, a spotless bride, the restored and complete Church that God has brought into being by his many, many acts of grace. So immediately, this has for us a connection with end times and with future hopes. However, in this parable, in this story about the wedding feast, things are not going exactly as they should. Because just when everything is ready, just when it's time to gather everybody in, all those invited begin to be on the crossed-off list.

Now it so happens that just a year ago, May last year, my daughter got married. And hopefully, we're praying very earnestly that all will be well for May next year, my son is getting married. So we're quite used to having lists of people who have been invited to one and of being invited to the new one. And only this afternoon we met with my son and his fiancée, and my daughter and son-in-law were there as well, and we were asking who'd replied to the invitations, and I'm afraid to say it sounds like my family, my sisters, are among the missing in terms of people who've yet to reply. Well, I'm not really sure whether in this instance, in this banquet, that we're referring to in the parable, whether they actually replied, but now the king wants to send out to fetch all these people that he'd invited and tell them to come in. And one by one, they're all beings scratched off. "Sorry, no, can do." "I've got this to do." "I've got that to do." All sorts of other obligations and issues have arisen, so they actually can't come along, and they give their apologies. What a to-do! I mean, clearly, this wedding banquet is the wedding banquet above all wedding banquets. It's – if there's anything you don't want to miss, it's this particular occasion. I mean, after all, if you were summoned to Buckingham Palace, an invitation from the Queen, an awful lot would have to stand in your way, would it not, for you to have to say, "Sorry, Your Majesty. But I can't make it." You wouldn't do

that, would you? In fact, it'd be the other way around, you'd be moving Heaven and Earth to be there at Buckingham Palace with your best bib and tucker. This just wouldn't be done the other way. And that's when I'm talking to a closet republican somewhere around the scenario. So one by one, they all say, "No, we're not coming." Whatever the excuse, clearly it's regarded as inadequate. And the king? Well, to say he was miffed would be to put it rather mildly. Hopping mad probably would be more likely. So the instructions to the servants are, "Well go out into the highways, the byways, into all the streets and just get any Tom, Dick and Harry to come in, because those who are invited aren't going to come. And those you are now drawing in will come. And hordes of people are drawn in. And it's they who sit down to share this wondrous feast for the wedding banquet of the son.

It makes us think though, sometimes, we have to be careful about being precisely sure that we're on the in-crowd, when it comes to being certain we're going to be in that heavenly home, where we're certain that we are the ones who are going to sit down the banquet. I remember a long, long while ago when I was working in social work, one of my fellow-workers, she was like me, a social worker assistant, so not a proper social worker, she was getting married. And we were having a conversation. She was somebody I knew from being at school with. So we were familiar with each other in the sense of being friends before we worked together. But I made the mistake one time of saying to her, that I'd got a number of weddings to go to, indicating that I was rather expecting to be invited to the wedding. The truth is, I was on the invite list. And apparently her mother did one time suggest to her, "Well, aren't you going to invite Robert because, you know, he's the very kind you?" She said "No." She crossed me off the list simply because I presumed I was going to be there. Tush tush! Black mark! So I didn't go.

So we just have to be a bit careful, because this is not the expected people. Probably if you take the parable and try to understand it, the expected people were the Pharisees, the scribes, the Sadducees and all the people who thought they were something in Jerusalem or in Judea or in Galilee at the time that Jesus was giving the story. All of those who thought they could presume on God's grace and goodness, because of their qualifications, were the ones who were scratched off the list, and they would not have another chance. So we have to be careful. But at the same time, we have to admire the grace of God that He invites, instead, these hordes of people, which are the people who you would not expect to be there, because they are not, in any sense of their own, holy or special or... in fact, they're very much the opposite. They're the people who are morally inclined to be suspect. You know, the dirty people, the people who are, you know, perhaps not always focused on the right sort of things. These are the people who are being drawn in to their heavenly host.

But then, another surprise, there is this guy who comes in and he's amongst all the guests. And he's not wearing his wedding suit. Well, this seems rather remarkable that there is this one individual, who, along with all the others have been surprisingly called in, dragged in out of the streets and byways, who presumably weren't expecting to be invited in the first place and have been taken by surprise and brought in, who therefore doesn't have his suit, his best bib and tucker, on! You think, why is that? Why is he singled out? What is it that actually is conveyed here by this other person?

I guess, everybody here tonight, and hopefully those who are watching with us online, have an experience and a knowledge and understanding of the love of God in their lives. They've actually, hopefully, had some sort of encounter with the living God, with the Lord Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, and is actually touched and changed then. You cannot possibly have contact in any sort of way with the God of Heaven, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ with the Holy Spirit, and not be changed. In actual fact, one way of describing this change is actually that, like, we change our clothing and make ourselves or are (perhaps to put it better this way) made to be people whose clothes are changed by our Lord.

One of the things I remember for Eleanor's wedding was that I had to go to the suit hire shop, so that I would look exactly like the other main men of the occasion wearing the blue suits and the pink tie and pink pocket handkerchief so that I was part of the bridal party. When Tim gets married next year, no doubt we should be doing exactly the same. You don't go to a wedding, do you, in your garden clothes? But it's that encounter with the living God that actually brings the change in our hearts. When in times past, when you were baptised, this was perhaps way back in the Middle Ages, you were stripped naked on one side of the baptismal pool, you were taken down into the water, you were fully immersed by the bishop, and when you came out of the water on the other side, you were clothed in white. It's not so long ago since we used to celebrate something like that on Whit Sunday, because Whit Sunday was called Whit Sunday because it was when they wore white to symbolise the clothing of the Holy Spirit. It's this encounter with God that brings the people who are invited into the wedding feast to wear wedding garments, because they are receiving these garments, not because they make them or put them on themselves, but because you are clothed with power from on high, you are clothed with a newer raiment, fit for the Kingdom of Heaven.

Right at the end of the book of Revelation, you're told that the saints of Heaven have made their clothes righteous by the deeds of the saints and by the blood of the Lamb. So therefore it is impossible to be in Heaven and at the Son's banquet, the King's Son's banquet and not to be wearing your wedding clothes. You have to. So when the King comes and spots this interloper, there's clearly something that has gone on, that has prevented him being enfolded in the right robes, the robes of righteousness, for which he should be arrayed. "How did you manage to get in here?" says the King. See, I think the best way of understanding it is simply, if we seek to remain untouched by the King, if we are not changed in the heart of our being, we cannot possibly put on the robes of righteousness. Because we are called, says Paul in Romans, to be conformed to the image of the Son, and to wear those robes of righteousness, so that when we gather at the feast in the Kingdom of Heaven, and celebrate the banquet for that marriage, that celestial marriage, we shall be adorned as all of those others in the heavenly realms. Let us pray therefore, that when we have those encounters with God, day by day in our lives, that we are continually changed. As Paul writes, in his second letter to the Corinthians¹ and Charles Wesley picks up in his great hymn *Love Divine All Loves Excelling*, that we are changed from one degree of glory to another, and that we constantly give over ourselves to His Kingdom, so that his Kingdom and the clothing of righteousness is being built up and given to us at this moment, and continuing until we are with him.

Amen.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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Please note: inclusive language was not introduced into the NIV until the 2011 edition.

1 2 Corinthians 3:18, e.g.