



What a week for the world

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Year A, Ordinary 28

Psalm 23; Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

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What a week for the world. The erupting conflict in the Middle East, images of brutality and destruction. The huge cost of human life and destroyed buildings. Then another terrible earthquake in Afghanistan. People with very little - left with even less. Many lives were lost and we barely hear about it with high priority news stories.

Closer to home the elections. The results which may not be clear for a while with party coalitions etc.

The gospel today follows on from the parable of the tenants last week. The parable of the wedding banquet includes allegory and analogy that can be seen as dividing people into groups of good and bad. It seems dangerous to go down that road. Politically in Aotearoa New Zealand, and globally in the Middle East, Russia and the Ukraine, and other places of conflict we risk continuing stereotypes, misinformation and generalisations. Everything is so complicated and it is hard to discern the truth.

Who is right, who is wrong. Can we even define the Truth with a capital T? Why are some so focussed on who will be welcomed in and who will be cast out?

In all the unrest in our troubled world we do know that it is the innocent civilians, especially children, who suffer through no fault of their own.

I don't know about you, but I sometimes feel overwhelmed about the enormity of the issues in our world and indeed in our own lives. There is a sense that tension is building in all sorts of ways and places. What grounds me, and what spoke to me when I read the gospel and commentaries on this passage, is the centrality of what we do each Sunday.

I am a person who loves the sacraments.

The sacrament we think about most often is the sacrament of Holy Communion. The Eucharist is the sacrament commemorating the action of Jesus at the last Supper. In Eucharist we are immersed in the hospitality of God who is both the host and the meal.

In Eucharist we allow all who want to partake. The Eucharist offers a merciful and compassionate space for all who choose to encounter God.

Yet so often in the past it has been confined to a narrow space. Children were excluded, divorced people were excluded, queers were excluded. How can we put aside the misperceptions and fears of the other that leads us to whittle down the inclusion of all. I believe that consciously or unconsciously we put limitations on others due to cultural or religious norms or even sometimes our liberal values.

In Psalm 23 the table is laid before God's beloved while the enemies are outside observers. Jesus came and expanded the image. Love your enemies. In the Eucharist, God is providing sustenance necessary for life for all who come and want to receive.

I remember a few years ago being in a church where a well-meaning welcomer asked a young man to take his cap off as he walked into the church. The youngster turned around and walked out. Yes, I know about customs, and respect etc. Yet an opportunity was lost.

As a church we are to extend hospitality to those who are like and unlike us, by providing space for them to encounter and experience God's unrelenting mercy and compassion.

We too often want the safe soft side of following the teaching of Christ and shy away from the more difficult work of social justice and outreach.

We want peace on earth but do not want to work towards that end or change our own lives and actions.

Sometimes we turn down the invitation - and others will be invited in our place. We want to be at the wedding banquet but we are not always dressed in an acceptable way. In this parable the unrobed guest does not show the fruits of living as guest at the banquet of grace. When asked by the host to account for the way he appears he has nothing to say.

The parable of the wedding banquet invites us to reflect on the relationship between grace of election (all were invited) and the obligations of obedience (to be clothed with Christ and to live in Christ.)

Though many are chosen and all are welcome - actually living the gospel out, being clothed in the right way - is not easy.

As we think of the atrocities in the Middle East we can be quick to offer an opinion, even take a side - however are we also able to act with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience with those in our own families, our own cities, our own nation?

I conclude with a prayer from a Palestinian Christian (from St George's Cathedral Jerusalem.)

Pray not for Arab or Jew,
for Palestinian or Israeli,
but pray rather for ourselves
that we might not divide them in our prayers,
but keep them both together in our hearts.
Amen.

(This sermon was shorter to allow time for the completion of the Church Life Survey 2023.)