

NO TIME FOR SMUGNESS: Cathedral, 15 October 2017

While we all wait with politely bated breath for the announcement of a new-ish government for New Zealand we look across the Pacific to the USA and see an actual Apocalypse Now. People mowed down in America's worst mass shooting, and not by a Muslim extremist; California on fire and a demonic toddler dismantling the infrastructure with his trigger finger twitching alarmingly. Ex-George W. Bush aide and senior policy adviser Michael Gerson warns that the *“time for panic and decision is upon us”* because the *“thin line of sane, responsible advisers at the White House could break any moment.”* One commentator wrote *If you're not panicking, you're not paying attention.*

So while we wait, here, we might be tempted towards the smugness that comes from distance even while World War III remains a horrifyingly real possibility even as we memorialize Passchendaele 100 years ago.

If you're not panicking you're not paying attention might serve as an interpretive key for our difficult gospel reading. If you were paying attention, you might have thought *Is this supposed to be a portrait of God?* The king in this story behaves more like Trump, surely – killing, burning, rounding people up?

It would be tempting here to say *Oh, I like Luke's version of this story much better – no wedding, no violence, just some feeble excuse-making and then a nice party for the poor.*

But no, we're stuck with Matthew's very spiky version of this story with all its nightmarish apocalyptic. It's not realistic (or pretending to be realistic) in any sense. The raging king puts the wedding feast on hold while his soldiers kill those who killed his messengers and burns their city and then resumes the feast with new conscripts, both good and bad people! After all, this is one invitation you couldn't refuse. Smile like a North Korean smiles.

This is dangerous material in the hands of fundamentalists, and plays right into the hands of Americans who think that Donald Trump is God's anointed and that mass shootings are not the result of gun laws that should be a spur national shame and repentance. You don't have to look far on the net to find right-wing so-called Christian broadcasters who call the Las

Vegas shootings “God's judgment”. Like this, for example, on “Pass The Salt Live”: *“We’ve reached the point here in America where a lot of people are going to be killed,” Why? Because it’s the judgment of God coming on America. God’s going to be killing a lot of people. Now, we don’t like that theology, do we? We don’t like that theology, but it sure seems pretty good to me.”*

So as an aside, it's important to know how to read the Bible as a collection, a library of writings. We can at least say that the Bible takes an unflinching view of human nature in all of its glory and tragedy. And we can say that if we actually read it in depth we will discover that it is horrifying and repugnant as much as it is uplifting. As adults we simply cannot afford the luxury of regressing to nostalgic recollection of childhood Bible stories.

I have found C.S. Lewis very useful here. In “Reflections on the Psalms” he wrote: *The human qualities of the raw materials show through. Naivety, error, contradiction, even (as in the cursing Psalms) wickedness are not removed. The total result is not “the Word of God” in the sense that every passage, in itself, gives impeccable science or history. It carries the Word of God; and we... receive that word from it not by using it as an encyclopedia or an encyclical but by steeping ourselves in its tone or temper and so learning its overall message.*

One writer suggests that the Scriptures are like the Sacrament – we consume them and digest them and are thus nourished by them.

So when we are dealing with this passage from Matthew it is OK to really chew it over! Because the writer of this parable - we needn't imagine that is actually Jesus' original teaching - has essentially constructed an allegory based largely on the simple parable we have in Luke and echoed in the later “Gospel of Thomas” saying which is also about excuse-making.

The writer has given us what today we might call a “Mashup” - a combination of the parable with an allegory about the rejection of Jesus (and his later disciples) by the Jewish leaders, heavily influenced by the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD as a perceived sign of God's judgment.

Matthew also has the early church in mind in his storytelling. He is the

only writer who looks pragmatically at the early church and sees both “good and bad together” at the wedding feast, just as he is the only evangelist to include the story of the wheat and the weeds growing together. Matthew sees the coming judgment as the place where these will be sorted out.

Added to this allegory is the strange and enigmatic focus on the guest who is without the proper wedding garment. I think I would be dumbstruck too if such a despot addressed me as “friend”. “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” Notice, though, that the question is not “*Why aren't you wearing a wedding robe,*” but “*How did you get in?*” Maybe a snappy answer would be “blame your bouncer”. But as the story stands, the peevish king doesn't just show him the door but in what might seem a massive over-reaction commands that he be “bound hand and foot and cast into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”, which reminds me of the Calvinist preacher who was holding forth on this subject. He was interrupted by a student who enquired *but what if you haven't got your teeth any more?* And the preacher replied, with relish, “*Teeth will be provided!*”

The addition of this cameo to the parable is Matthew shining a spotlight on the infant church. He is saying *Don't assume that turning up is all that matters. There's no room for the smug who think that God has rejected some but I'm all right Jack.* The wedding clothes are a metaphor for the new life in Christ and the changes that are necessary in our lives, or evidence of fruitfulness. Transformation is not to be assumed or thought of as an optional extra to church attendance.

Other commentators warn us about too-readily joining the chorus of “Reject!” because it is human nature (in its sinfulness) which wants to find someone to point the finger at, someone who hasn't made the grade. Historically we are very good at this, like the divorced woman who, in the 60s was graciously allowed to play the organ even while being denied participation in the Holy Communion. But as hymnwriter Fred Kaan has put it:

*The church is like a table,
a table for a feast
to celebrate the healing*

*of all excluded-feeling
(while Christ is serving, kneeling,
a towel around his waist).*

These writers ask us where we might find the hidden Christ in this story.

Who is the One who was despised and rejected?

Who is the One without clothes when his robe was cast lots for?

Who is the One who was silent in the face of his accusers?

Who is the One who experienced the darkness of abandonment, anguish and death?

Far from allowing for smugness, Christ is even to be found among those cast out, those who have made the mistake of being seen without the propriety of wedding robes. Those failures. Those “rejects”.

Just so, when we look at America and North Korea today we can afford no smugness in Aotearoa. I don't mean the smugness of distance, which in the end might mean little in a nuclear conflagration. I mean the smugness of being GodZone. Under what judgment will our government stand if we do not enable every person to have enough resources, enough shelter and freedom from exploitation and violence. We cannot afford to confuse a historical myth of nationhood for current discomfiting reality.

As we begin this week of prayer for world peace we are invited to unite with people from other faith traditions to pray for this one world we share. May we consciously resist the rise of hatred, suspicion and cynicism and pray sincerely for hope, negotiation and peace-making to illuminate our path and our shared destiny.

Let's join in the Jewish prayer for Day 1:

