

## Morning Worship for 11 October 2020

from the United Reformed Churches at Morpeth,  
Widdrington and Gt Bavington

### Opening words

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

### Hymn: R&S 355 Jesus calls us o'er the tumult

#### Prayer of Approach

Jesus, you call us from  
our life's wild and restless sea  
into the peace of your presence.

We come to worship you  
and lay before you all that has  
caused us to worry and be anxious.  
So that in your presence  
we may find peace  
in which we may worship you  
with all our heart, soul and mind.

Jesus, you call us from  
the world's golden store  
to worship you, and you alone.

We come to worship you  
and lay before you all that has  
kept us from hearing your voice.  
So that in your presence  
we may hear your voice  
in which we may learn and grow  
and follow in the way you lead us.

Jesus, call us again.  
So that we may give our hearts to you  
and serve and love you.  
Today and forever.  
Amen.

**Reading: Exodus 32:1-14**

**Reading: Matthew 22:1-14**

#### Meditation

What were they supposed to do?  
Moses had been gone too long.

There Moses was, on top of the mountain, above the  
clouds, above reproach,  
in the presence of God himself,  
and there they were, left abandoned just waiting for  
a chance to move on, to get on with their lives.

Was Moses ever coming back?  
Had he been taken into heaven?  
Was it now up to them to make their own destiny?

So they told Aaron, Moses' second in command,  
the priest who spoke Moses' words for him,  
"Come, make us new gods who will go before us  
and lead us from this place."

So they made an offering,  
an offering of the most valuable things they could  
find.  
They each offered gold to this new god.  
Gold that Aaron took and fashioned into the shape of  
Apis, the bull god of the Egyptians,  
a god who granted fertility and strength,  
and would look after them after their death.

The priest made an altar,  
The people made an offering,  
and feasted.

And God heard their feasting.  
And God stopped calling them my people.

#### Prayer of Confession

God of Moses  
At times you have been seemed  
to be distant from us,  
too far away for us to feel your presence.

You have been way off in the distance -  
in the past -  
you have been the God of our parents  
and grandparents -  
and we struggle to feel your presence  
with us today.

We confess today that we have at times  
been impatient in waiting for you to act.  
We confess today that we have at times  
sought to worship other gods.  
Gods who we can touch and manipulate  
and through whom we can make  
our own destinies.

We don't have a shortage of golden calves

in our lives.

We worship our homes, our cars, our careers, things we have fashioned for ourselves thinking that through them we can find that which we are looking for.

And through our worship of these things we have failed to worship you.

Through our dependence on these things we have failed to depend on you.

For this we are sorry, and seek your forgiveness.

Today we want to be your people, and we come to worship you.

Amen

### Hymn: For everyone born a place at the table

#### Sermon

God walked into heaven and discovered that everyone was there. Absolutely everyone. And that didn't seem fair to God, for some of them had done terrible things in their lives. So everyone was summoned before God, where an angel read the ten commandments.

When the first commandment was read, God said, "Everyone who has broken this commandment will have to leave."

The same happened with each of the other commandments. By the time the angel had finished reading the seventh commandment, there was hardly anyone left. God looked up and saw a bunch of grim, self-righteous, do-gooders looking very pleased with themselves. For a few minutes God considered the prospect of eternity with them, and then shouted "All right, everyone come back"

I wonder how far down the list of the ten commandments you would get before you would have to leave through the pearly gates? Or perhaps you are one of those grim self-righteous?

We know the people of Israel had trouble keeping the commandments – the whole of the Old Testament tells of the ways in which the people were told to do what is right, but just could not obey the commands they were given. In today's reading it has only been a short while since they were given the ten commandments. Moses has given the people God's laws, they have listened to what God has decreed, and each time the people have responded by saying "We will do everything the Lord has said: we will obey." And yet here we see them already turning from the law and doing their own thing. The second

commandment was that "You shall have no other gods before me" – the people in our story today would have been among the very first to go as God read out his heavenly checklist!

And we are very quick to condemn the Israelites for this aren't we? They are the bad guys in the story. But we need to be reminded that we have all done the same thing in our own way, and in our own time. We too have at times worshipped other idols, which we have placed before our own worship of God.

We have created other idols which we worship and put before our worship of God. It might be the church building itself and the whole experience of coming to church has become more important than our worship of God. Over the past months people have had to wrestle with their faith, which has been so centred on coming to church each week and sharing with others – something that is a more tangible, easily reachable faith. We've had to wrestle with how we worship God when the church building and the fellowship we share is not there.

More personally we look to our wealth, or our careers, or our family life, as something which we have placed more importance on than worshipping God. We have looked to these things to fill that hole in our lives, and satisfy the longing within us. We have looked to these things because these are the things we can be more in control of, and just as the Aaron shapes the gold into the shape of a bull, we mould and fashion our own idols in hope they will satisfy our needs.

But there is a consequence? When the people in our passage from Exodus turned away from God, they found that God had turned away from them. And I love that conversation between God and Moses at the top of the mountain as God looks down on the people in their revelry below. God says to Moses "Go down, because **your** people, whom **you** brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt." When Moses first was called by God, God says to him: "I have heard the cry of **my** people....I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring **my** people, the Israelites out of Egypt." Now it is **your** people that **you** brought out of Egypt. God is ready now to turn his back on the people, and it is Moses reminds him of his promise and the covenant and intercedes on their behalf. And God gives them another chance.

Now if you were here last week, or listened at home, you will have heard me speak about the tenants of a vineyard, to whom the owner of the vineyard sent his servants to collect a harvest. But instead the servants were rejected and killed, and finally the owner sent his son, who too was rejected and killed. And Jesus warns that the owner of the vineyard would throw out those tenants and other tenants will take their place. We read this as a parable of the leaders of the Israelites, and the prophets God sends to them to remind them of their obligations, and how they were ignored. And how in the end God will give up on the leaders of Israel, and instead bring in new tenants who will lead God's people.

So to reinforce this message, Jesus begins to immediately tell the Chief Priests and Pharisees another parable. A parable about those who have been invited to a wedding feast, and upon their refusal to attend, others were invited to partake of the feast instead. The parable at times seems a little harsh to our modern western ears, and we perhaps need to understand more about the wedding traditions of that time to understand more fully what is going on in this parable.

It was customary in the times of Jesus for weddings to be much longer celebrations than they are today, perhaps taking a whole week, and one where the whole community was involved. So because of this, two invitations would normally be sent. The first is like a 'Save the Date' invitation – letting people know of the upcoming celebration. A second invite would then be sent letting the guests know that everything had been prepared, and the feast could begin.

In the parable that Jesus tells, the King is the one sending the invites. And people have already been invited, and have accepted the invitation, so now the King sends servants *to those who had been invited* but they refused to come. We might assume that in this parable the King is God, who invites the people of Israel to share in his feast, but when he sends his servants (the prophets) they refuse to come.

So the King sends more servants, with the message "The feast is ready. Everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet." We might assume that this echoes the cries of John the Baptist. "Come, Jesus is here. Look here is the lamb of God." But again, those who were invited paid no attention. They were too busy concentrating on their own fattened calves – their fields and their businesses – rather than responding to the King who calls them.

And so as a warning to those listening, the King is enraged and kills those he invited and destroys their city. The city of Jerusalem was destroyed, along with the Temple, some 30 years later, along with the killing of 1.1 million Jews, and the dispersal of the others to surrounding areas. Like the tenants thrown from the vineyard, Jesus warns the leaders of Israel that a time will come when God will turn away from them.

And when this happens, Jesus says, the King will send his servants to the street corners to invite all those he finds to the banquet. No longer will Israel be the invited ones, but the beggars, the outcasts, the gentiles, will all be given an invite to the feast. The gospel message, the salvation of God, will be shared now not with the Jews but with all those who were not invited in echoes of the hymn we have just sung, "For everyone born a place at the table"

But now Jesus teaches something different. In this parable there is a further message, and another surprise ending. For one of the wedding guests, one of those who accepts the invitation and attends the feast is not wearing the right clothes and is thrown out into the darkness. Now I don't know about you but that might seem quite a harsh dress code.

So again, we have to look at the wedding traditions of Jesus' time to understand a little more as to what is happening in this parable. It was traditional at weddings in New Testament times that the host would provide wedding clothes for those coming to the wedding. Everyone who attended would be offered the right clothes to wear if they didn't have them. Imagine a wedding today, where the bride and groom had bought all the bridesmaids dresses, and one bridesmaid refused to wear the dress, and instead turned up at the church in jeans and t-shirt. It would be seen as nothing other than an act of defiance, someone making a point. You can imagine that such guests might be treated in much the same fashion as the wedding guest in the parable.

When God invites us to join in the feast. When God invites us to be part of the kingdom. He gives us the spiritual clothes we need to wear. In our Exodus story the people of Israel had been chosen by God, they had been elected as God's people, they were invited to a share in the promised land – but they weren't wearing the right clothes. They wanted to be God's people, they wanted His protection, and for Him to look after them, but they were not willing to obey by the laws of the covenant.

The prophet Isaiah later on will tell the wayward Israel of the promise that God has for his people and says “ I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.” Israel will wear the garments of salvation that God offers to them and be clothed in righteousness.

Jesus’ message to those who are invited to the feast, and who accept the invitation, is that they too will be offered the robe of righteousness. And for those who refuse to wear it, they will find there is no place for them in God’s kingdom of Righteousness and Justice. There is a requirement for those who are part of the Kingdom to live in the ways of the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God can only be here on earth if God’s people choose to live the ways of the Kingdom in their lives.

Paul when he writes to the first Christians at Philippi says “I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law , but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.”

Paul urges the people of Philippi to clothe themselves in this righteousness and says:

“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. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.”

All are invited to be part of God’s kingdom. For everyone born there is a place at the table. Jesus tells the parable to the leaders of Israel as a reminder of what may happen to those who reject the invitation.

Jesus tells the parable to gentiles, the beggar, the outcast and the widow to describe all those who will be invited to join in the feast that God lays out for his people.

And Jesus tells the parable to us as a reminder that when we accept God’s invitation to be part of the kingdom, there is a requirement that those who participate need to live according to the values of that kingdom.

“Many are indeed invited, but few are chosen.”

## **Prayers of Intercession**

Lord Jesus,  
Whenever our traditions, or our new ways of thinking,  
blind us to your truth,  
then speak clearly to us,  
and challenge us to be open again to  
be changed by you.  
May we be your people  
who hear your words  
and live out your commands.

Lord Jesus,  
we recognise the many powerful influences  
in our world today  
which distract many and lead them from your truth.  
Speak quietly to us your words of wisdom  
so that we may encourage those around us  
to acknowledge the ways of your kingdom  
and to live in righteousness and truth.

Lord Jesus,  
may our homes and our habits  
be part of the life of your kingdom  
where we are guided by your will  
and ruled by your love.

Lord Jesus,  
in your kingdom there is no room for  
cruelty, suffering or disease.  
We pray now for all those in pain  
and ask your Spirit of healing and comfort  
to be with them today.  
For you wish no evil on us  
but share our sorrow and give us the  
strength to bear it.

Lord Jesus,  
As we struggle to live without those  
whom we love but have been taken from us,  
have mercy upon us.  
Let us share with the peace you give  
over which death has no power at all.

Lord Jesus,  
we thank you that we have  
been invited to the wedding feast,  
clothe us in your robes of righteousness  
that we might be worth of your calling. AMEN  
**The Lord’s Prayer**

**Hymn: R&S 567 Thy hand O God has guided.**

**Blessing**