

PRAY

This morning we're splitting our talk into two parts. Our first part is the last of three parables that Jesus has told in a row. You remember? The two sons and how they responded to the Father when he asked them to work in the vineyard. Then the landowner who rented out a field and then sent his servants to collect the rent. They were beaten and some killed and finally he sends his son who is killed.

They're all about how people respond to the invitation to be a part of Jesus's kingdom, God's kingdom, this new kingdom that he's been preaching about all through Matthew's gospel.

Today's parable is about a wedding. I went to my nephew's wedding last week. It was a very happy time as he married Kim. Both sets of parents were there, family, friends, people that were close to the couple. We all got an invitation and we had to reply to say whether we were going or not. Now it would have been very strange if all these family and friends said No, we're too busy or the Test match is on and didn't come. But that's exactly what is happening in this parable. People had been invited to the banquet some time before and now that the wedding is happening the servants go and say, "it's time to come". But all these people refuse; they've all got excuses. So the invitation goes out again and *Who's invited? v.9 – "invite to the banquet anyone you can find."* The invitation is a wide-open one – anyone can come, the tax-collectors, the prostitutes (remember last week Jesus said that they were coming into the Kingdom before the religious guys), the lame, the blind, the nobodies, the riff-raff, the people who thought that they were forgotten. They were thrilled that God's message was for them all. So the wedding hall is filled with all these unlikely guests.

And we can see what Jesus is saying quite clearly. Israel's leaders in Jesus' day, and the many Jewish people who followed them were like guests invited to a wedding – God's wedding party, the party he was throwing for his Son. But they had refused. The Messiah was here and

they didn't want to know. But others have responded and would respond, the unclean and the Gentiles – in fact anyone could come into the kingdom.

But then there's this twist at the end of the parable, in v.11 – everyone is wearing their wedding clothes except one man. And the king chucks him out – in fact there's a rather severe judgment for him in v.13. It isn't what we would expect to hear about Jesus, loving and kind. So what's going on? There's a few things here. And I want to look at some of the ideas that have been put forward. I think they all have something to say to us.

One thought is that the clean clothes are the garment of repentance – they are like the cleansing that God gives us through Jesus' death on the cross. The host has provided the clothes for everyone to wear. This man has refused to wear the clothes the host gave him and so insulted the host. He thinks he knows what is best – he decides what he thinks will be good enough for the wedding. But his good enough is not good enough for the king. So the king has the man thrown out. God will do the same to anyone who relies on his own fancied goodness to gain entry into the kingdom. The prophet Isaiah was writing about this 700 years before Jesus. God's message to us through him was this: (64:6). "All our righteous acts are like filthy rags". That is our problem: we are literally not fit to be seen before God, let alone to enjoy the feast of his kingdom. But the same prophet finds the solution a few chapters earlier: "I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation, and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest." (Is 61:10). Did you notice that? God gives us clean clothes – only he can make us clean. His death on the cross has made us clean.

Here's another thought about the wrong wedding clothes. We want to hear that everyone is all right exactly as they are; that God loves us as we are and doesn't want us to change. But when the lame came to Jesus he didn't say you're all right as you are – he healed them. When the tax-collectors and prostitutes came to Jesus he didn't say you're all right as you are. He said that to come into his kingdom they needed to repent, to turn around from the way they were going. His love reached them *where* they were, but his love refused to let them stay *as*

they were. Love wants the best for the beloved. Their lives were transformed, healed, changed. They were going to be transformed back into the original image of God that God made them right back in the garden. And that's what he wants to do with us!! He wants to put on us righteous clothing. The clothes of truth, justice, love, mercy and holiness -if you or me refuse to wear them then we are saying that we don't want to stay at the party.

I want to finish my thoughts here by saying it's **Only Jesus**. I was talking to a man outside our church on Friday. He said how he got on well with Muslims and Hindus and really there was no difference between our religions – we all want to know and serve God. But as we think about what Jesus has said all through Matthew and what this parable teaches us, the truth is that it is only through his death and resurrection that we can truly know God. His death and resurrection are the right clothes for us to enter the banquet; not our own clothes. Not my coming to church; not my wonderful prayer life; not my good works; they're all good things, they're not bad, but that's not what saves us, that's not what rescues us. Have you noticed what Jesus is doing, especially in these last few chapters. He's not saying be good people and that's it; he's saying "I must go to Jerusalem, I must go to the cross". This is why I came to earth – I came to die, I came to rescue. That is why I came. We must accept the invitation to the feast and we must come on his terms, wearing the right clothes, which only he can provide.

PART TWO

v.15 – 46 – Q&A Pt.1 – this is just like the ABC programme called Q & A. There is a topic on an issue like climate change or immigration or something like that. And then there is a panel to answer questions and discuss the issue. Here Jesus is the only person on the panel. There are three issues, actually, there are 4, and the people who are asking the questions don't want answers; they want to embarrass Jesus or get him to say something wrong, to trap him, so they can accuse him and bring him down.

We're going to look at just the first question today and then the next three questions next week. Two groups of people come up to Jesus with a question – Pharisees disciples or learners and the Herodians. The Pharisees were a group of scholars, they studied the Bible a lot. They weren't priests, but they prided themselves on obeying the law, but they also believed that the law needed to be re-interpreted according to the times. So they had a whole tradition of writing extra laws that were based on the Old Testament. They didn't agree that the Roman govt should be able to force people to pay the tax to the Roman emperor. The Herodians, were King Herod's supporters, and he was only king because the Romans let him be king so they supported the paying of the tax. So it was a pretty weird coalition wasn't it? They didn't agree with each other on the taxes, but they did agree on trying to trap Jesus – they didn't want Jesus messing up their power and their position in society.

So they do all their sucking up to Jesus language – we know you are a man of integrity; you teach the way of God; you aren't swayed by others. I feel like saying, “WELL, why don't you listen to him and follow him then?” So they ask their question: “Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar?”

Jesus knows what they're up to and immediately gets stuck into them. “You hypocrites, you say all those nice things about me but you don't believe me. Anyway, here's the answer to your question”. It would seem that Jesus is really stuck here. If he answers Yes, the Pharisees and the people will turn on him; if he says No don't pay the taxes, the Herodians will take him to the Romans and have him put into jail or killed. There was a precedent for this. When Jesus was a boy there was a Jewish man called Judas who had led a revolt precisely on the issue of not paying the imperial tax. The Romans had crushed his revolt mercilessly, leaving crosses around the countryside, with dead and dying revolutionaries on them, as a warning that paying the tax was compulsory, not optional. So the Pharisees' question was a question that might cost you your life if you answered it wrong.

So Jesus starts his answer by asking for a coin, a denarius. It's ironic that he, the ruler of the world, doesn't have a coin, but the ones who are testing him, they have a coin. Now you gotta

remember that these coins were hated, because of what was on the coins. Jews weren't allowed to put images of people, you know, human faces on their coins; but Caesar; he had his image stamped on his. But it was also what was written around the edge of the coin – these words sent a shudder through every devout, or loyal, Jew. The words “Tiberius Caesar, Augustus, son of the deified Augustus (that is the god Augustus), chief priest”. This emperor was proclaiming himself as God and the high priest of the gods – what Jew could handle this stuff with that kind of writing on them?

So it's like Jesus is handling a dead rat as he holds this coin – What's he going to say? He says “Whose image is on the coin? And whose inscription – or what's written about the Emperor?” Notice Jesus is now questioning them?

Caesar's they say.

And then comes the response from Jesus. “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's.” They hadn't asked him about God, but look what Jesus is doing. It's as if he's saying, “Pay Caesar back in his own coin.” Ok, but ALSO pay God back in his own coin too.” Everyone knew that Caesar and the Romans were trying to push the idea that Caesar was God on to the Jews, and the Jews hated this. But Jesus has just turned this all around. He's saying how are you Jewish leaders going in the way that you are responding to God? Their plan to trap Jesus has backfired because now Jesus is challenging them. Have you really given your full allegiance to God? Are you just playing games, keeping Caesar happy while speaking of God.

Jesus came, not to change the world order, that is, who is the greatest ruler on earth etc. Jesus came to defeat the real enemies of the world, sin and death, as we'll see more next week.

God's kingdom was greater than Caesar's. But it was a different kingdom.

What struck me in this story was the word translated “give”. It actually means “give back”. The coin bears Caesar’s image: give it back to him. But also, you bear God’s image: so give yourself back to him. This “giving back” thing – Jesus is saying that the payment of a tax, Jesus insists, is not a gift to Caesar who levies it, but it’s actually a debt owing to him for benefits received, the roads and the peace that Roman rule brought. Both Caesar and God have their rights; therefore to pay taxes to one is not to rob the other of his due. We sometimes talk about the secular and the sacred – those things that are part of the world and those that are connected to God. Here what Jesus is saying is there is no divide between secular and sacred but there is a difference. We are citizens of two worlds, the earthly and the heavenly and we have duties to discharge in both. Jesus’ disciples will always have difficulty living in this world. As the early Christians found out very soon, when the Romans said that they must worship Caesar as a god they refused and they were persecuted and killed for this. We need to keep asking God for wisdom as we navigate living in this world but belonging to a different kingdom which is not of this world.

We finish this morning with this question. What does it mean to give back to God? We were made in God’s image. The picture in Genesis chapters 2 & 3 is of God in relationship with man and woman in the garden of Eden. We read of God walking in the garden in the cool part of the day, coming to meet Adam. In one sense we have nothing that we can give back to God. He already owns everything. But he has entrusted the care of ourselves and this world we live in to us. In fact he has done everything to restore the possibility of relationship with him. Jesus has rescued us by dying on the cross. He has invited us to join him at the feast. He has provided the wedding clothes that we should wear – repentance, love should all be a part of the way God is changing us. Let us give back to God - everything we do and are - it’s the only reasonable thing to do. Let us give back everything we are, everything we have, to God. If you want to know more about this, how to do this please talk to me or someone else who you know follows Jesus.

Prayer: Lord teach us what it means to be made in your image; what it means to give back to you everything we have and are. Help us to trust you, to grow in our trust of you. Help us to be open to you changing us.

Thank you again that you came into the world and have rescued us. Help us to live as you forgiven children today and through this coming week.