

17th Sunday after Pentecost 9th October 2011

John Dunill

Exodus 32: 1-14; Ps 106: 1-6, 20-24; Phil 4: 1-9; Matthew 22: 1-14

1.

'I will proclaim to the world the deeds of Gilgamesh. This was the man to whom all things were known; this was the king who knew the countries of the world. He was wise, he saw mysteries and new secret things; he brought us a tale of the days before the flood. He went on a long journey, was weary, worn out with labour; returning, he rested, he engraved on a stone the whole story.'

So begins the ancient Epic of Gilgamesh, the tale of a man who probably really lived long ago, and was King of Uruk, on the River Euphrates in what is now Southern Iraq. The story comes from nearly 3000 years before Christ, and was written in different versions and in several languages on clay tablets, which were lost for thousands of years and dug up in the 19th century. [I am reading in the Penguin Classics edition 1972, but there's a new version Penguin Classics, 2003]

We're told: 'When the gods created Gilgamesh they gave him a perfect body ... two thirds they made him god, and one-third man.' But in fact we discover he was no god but a man, though a mighty one. This very human story tells how Gilgamesh was given a friend, Enkidu, a wild man of the hills who had been tamed, and together they had great adventures and performed mighty deeds. They even slew the god Humbaba, the Evil One. But when Enkidu suddenly died, Gilgamesh was bereft: bereft for his friend, and devastated at the realisation that he too will die.

And so Gilgamesh sets out to find the secret of eternal life, and travels alone to the ends of the earth to find it. At one point he meets a woman, the Ale-wife, who says: 'Gilgamesh, where are you hurrying to? You will never find the life that you are looking for. So fill your belly with good things, feast and rejoice; cherish the little child who holds your hand and make your wife happy in your embrace, for this is the lot of man.' But he's not satisfied with this answer and presses on. Yet at the end he comes back without the secret: his journey has given him wisdom of a kind, but not the deepest wisdom he hoped for. He is ultimately not 'the man to whom all things were known'.

2

So Gilgamesh, though he was a great king who lived and died 5000 years ago, is 'Everyman', is one of us, and shares the quest we're all

on to find meaning in life, to find before we die some wisdom which will assure us our life has meaning and value beyond the day-to-day. It's a universal quest. On Thursday I was driving down South Street behind a car with the bumper-sticker 'Don't follow me, I'm lost'. It turned into Murdoch University, which perhaps was a good sign – though indeed universities these days are not places which offer wisdom (highly specialised kinds of information, but hardly wisdom).

Wisdom for the perplexed is what all the religions and philosophies of the world seek to offer, each in its own way. In the literature of Israel, there's an image of Wisdom as an imaginary female figure, whom God sends to dwell in Israel, who builds a house with seven pillars, sets a table, and sends out an invitation:

You that are simple, turn in here ... Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity and live, and walk in the way of insight.

That's from Proverbs (Prov 9: 1–6), and elsewhere the figure of Wisdom says:

Come to me you who desire me, and eat your fill of my fruits,
for the memory of me is sweeter than honey,
the possession of me sweeter than the honeycomb. (Sirach 24: 19–20)

It was the same voice of Wisdom that people heard in Jesus, as he taught in Galilee and in Jerusalem; divine Wisdom speaking through him, calling people to find, beneath the everyday, a possibility of insight, of maturity, of life. He says:

Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens,
and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me;

For I am gentle and humble in heart,

And you will find rest for your souls.

For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matthew 11: 28–30)

In these next four weeks, I want to invite you to listen to Jesus the divine Wisdom, holder of the secret of life, as we hear his words spoken in the temple in Jerusalem. Because they sensed he was the holder of secret wisdom, people flocked to hear him – those who knew they were ‘simple’, knew their life had an emptiness they could not fill. While others, who claimed to be wise, came not to listen but to test and question and criticise. In what mood do we listen to the words he spoke?

3

Jesus’ teaching today is in the form of a parable, the Parable of the Wedding banquet. It’s a story preserved in three versions, all slightly different, and plainly the story has grown in the telling. But I think we can hear Jesus’ words still.

It’s a parable, of course, about invitations – invitations to the feast of life. Now invitations are things we love to receive, and also to give out. But giving invitations is also a dangerous business because you make yourself vulnerable: what if people refuse? It isn’t wise to stand up and say ‘Everyone, come to my party!’ in case they all just shrug their shoulders and say ‘Can’t be bothered’.

I don’t know what you have to do to be given the Order of Australia – or even one of those fancy medieval orders they have in England, the order of the Garter or the Holy Thistle – but if I was, I’m sure it would begin with a letter in an embossed envelope saying ‘Her Majesty’ or ‘the Governor-General’ ‘has it in mind to offer you the order of whatever’. Very delicately worded, so that if I don’t say ‘Yes please’ with sufficient cringing gratitude the idea can quietly drop out of Her Majesty’s or the Governor-General’s mind, and nobody knows the offer was rebuffed, because it hasn’t actually been made. Nobody in high places has to lose face.

Jesus’ story is about a man who gives a dinner party, and invites his friends, who say ‘Yes please’, but then, when the time comes, start shrugging their shoulders and discovering subsequent engagements. And the host says, ‘That’s sad but let’s have a party anyway’, and he

opens his home to everyone, rich and poor, the well-behaved and the riff-raff, so they can all share his feast.

It's not how we'd respond, of course. If that happened to you or me, we'd be hurt and angry, and wed shove the food back into the freezer and spend the next month chewing cold venison and saying 'It's their loss, why should I care? grumble, grumble'. But it's a parable about GOD, who us not afraid to lose face – unlike you, me and the Governor-General – because he loves to give, and delights that anyone will receive the invitation to life with joy.

So that, or something like it, is Jesus' original story and its message: God is not afraid to lose face; and we may not be worthy to receive God's invitation to eternal life, but God invites us anyway. The secret of life is hearing God's invitation and saying Yes.

4

But it is, as I said, a story which has grown in the telling, and Matthew's version has grown a lot as you can tell if you compare it to the version in Luke chapter 14 [also the Gospel of Thomas ch, 64]. In Matthew the householder and his dinner party have become a king holding a wedding banquet for his son; and the people invited don't just refuse the invitation, they murder the slaves sent to invite them, and then the king sends an army to destroy their city. It's all suddenly become wildly improbable, at a human level, and we realise, perhaps, that Matthew has turned the little story into a grand allegory, a picture of how Israel rejected the messiah, the Bridegroom, and persecuted the Messiah's followers, the church, and how God would bring judgement on Israel for its resistance to the Gospel.

So, though the message of the story is the same – God's invitation to everyone to come in, bad as well as good – the image of God in the story has changed. In Matthew's version, the angry king represents an angry God, who will punish those who reuse his invitation.

This becomes even clearer in the part Matthew had added (it's not in either of the other versions) about how the king finds a man not

wearing a wedding robe, and has him bound hand and foot and cast into outer darkness. It seems not only over the top, but massively unfair: why would a man brought in off the street at a moment's notice for a surprise party be wearing a wedding robe?

We have to assume that wedding robes were being handed out at the door. We don't know that this a practice then, but in a society where people mostly had one set of clothes, a clean festal garment was a very acceptable present – like the ones Joseph gave to his brothers in Genesis 45, and the three sets he gave to his younger brother Benjamin. Besides, the story says there was one man not wearing a wedding garment, not a whole room full. By coming to the wedding but refusing to wear the wedding garment he's grabbing the food and drink but refusing to join the celebration. The king addresses him as 'Friend', hetaire, a word Matthew always uses with an ironic edge, meaning 'false friend'. (In Matthew 26, it's what Jesus says to Judas in the garden of Gethsemane: 'Friend, do what you have come to do'.)

So although this section sits very oddly at the end of the story about an invitation, it's really making the same point as the first guests who said Yes and then No – that here is someone who seems to receiving God's generous invitation, but is not.

5

No doubt we feel uneasy about the image of an angry God, burning cities and banishing those he dislikes to outer darkness. And so we should. I'm saying that this image comes from Matthew, not Jesus, and is almost the opposite of Jesus' message about the open invitation. But it does, rather crudely, make a point which needs to be made, that if accepting God's invitation brings life, refusing God's invitation brings – less than life. There is a cost to refusing God's offer, not because God is piqued and wants us to suffer, but because we need the life God longs to give us, if we are to discover fully our own humanity. If we don't, we lose out. We can answer the call the call to let ourselves be drawn through prayer and loving action deeper into the Divine, or we can refuse it. It is our choice.

So we may think of ourselves as Gilgamesh-like seekers after God, but Jesus says God goes before us with an invitation. This was the message, with its call and its challenge, that had people in Jerusalem flocking to hear Jesus, like a bearer of divine Wisdom, 'a man to whom all things were known'. And then they made their choice.

For some, the challenge and the cost were too great, and they turned away. That was their choice. But not all. We read in John chapter 6 that Jesus asked the Twelve: 'Do you also wish to go away?' and Simon peter replied for them all: 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life'. Let's listen to those words.