

MATTHEW 22:1-14
A PARTY INVITATION?

How has Jesus changed your life? That's a big question and I'm not expecting an answer. It is a question you might like to ponder later. How has Jesus changed your life? Is there a different spirit in you now? Do you live with a different set of values than perhaps you once did and would see these as Jesus' values? There may be all kinds of ways in which we look at ourselves and see that we're different people now from before – how much of that is down to our relationship with Jesus? Some of that change is comforting – He gives us a new understanding of ourselves that is good, to see that “I am a new person, a person loved by God and blessed by God; this is who I am and it makes me see myself in a better light”. Some of that change is disturbing, because it challenges the way we see ourselves or the world, and we don't like it because it disturbs our view of the world and shakes us up!

Today's story is one of these “shaking-us-up” moments. It starts off well, but there are bits of it later that we find disturbing. There are times as a preacher when I think that I'll just avoid these stories; there's a version of this story elsewhere that is much more attractive and less disturbing, so would it not be better to read that one? But there are times when we need to be disturbed! The Bible has some great, good, comforting words to say to us, but it also has some hard, uncomfortable truths and ways in which it wants to shake us up. Some of the things I've read about this story this week have shown people uncomfortable with it and with the notion that Jesus could say such things, and that's as it should be – we should be disturbed; so let's not walk away but listen for the challenge and take it to heart.

First of all, this is a story! In stories you can make anything happen, even things you wouldn't ever contemplate doing in real life. This is a story; the Bible calls them parables, because they are stories that are designed to teach us something about God, or about faith, or about life. *“The Kingdom...”* (Matthew 22:2) “This is what life is like when God is King”. So, what has this story to teach us about what life is like for us when God is King, when Jesus is Lord? We have to dig a little to find the answer to that question today and when we do, we discover something very important – our attitude to Jesus has consequences! People who heard the story first were reacting to Jesus in a particular way, and that will have consequences. When we take away all the detail of the story and see the big theme and that's what we discover – our attitude to Jesus has consequences. Let's look.

It is a story about a banquet. The king is arranging a wedding party for his son and sends out his servants with a “Save-the-date” message; “we're doing this on; keep the date free”. Then, next he sent his servants out to tell people that “the banquet is today and is now ready; so please come”. They refused and not only that but when the king sent more servants they behaved despicably; they not only ignored the servants and their message but ill-treated them and killed them. There are consequences to that behaviour and in the story Jesus has the king take extreme revenge on these people! Then, other people are invited: *“Go to...”* (Matthew 22:9f) The door is open to others to come to the banquet and lots of people take up invitation gladly; the king is happy to see the hall full, but then he spots someone badly dressed; he is thrown out because he has no wedding clothes. *“Many...”* (Matthew 22;14)

Remember – this is a story and stories can take you to places that you wouldn't go in real life. What is the story about? It is about the way in which people react to the king and his invitation. It is about people who ignore the king, and people who abuse these servants simply going about their business. It is about a man who can't be bothered respecting his host and changing his clothes to go to a wedding. That's what this story is about! Jesus told this story alongside some other stories to answer the question from the Jewish leaders “why should we listen to you? What authority do you have?” He has told the story of the two sons – *“Which...”* (Matthew 21:31) – and the parable of the tenants – *“What will...”* (Matthew 21:40) These two stories leave these Jewish leaders in no doubt as to what God requires of them. But they fail to see Jesus as God's Son; they don't listen to Him, they don't

accept Him and they have killed the prophets who came before Him and by the end of this week they will kill the Son by their conspiracies.

This is a “shaking-up” story. How has Jesus changed your life? For lots of people, the answer to that will be “He hasn’t!” Life has just gone on regardless of Jesus. Some people have heard the story of Jesus, have heard the gospel and it has not affected them at all because they haven’t given it the chance. *“They paid...” (Matthew 22:5)* In the story, people found their business or their field more important than coming to the banquet and we could find all sorts of things that we have considered to be more important than Jesus at some time in our lives. It wouldn’t be hard to create a list of things that we could point to and point the finger at ourselves and say that these things are or have been more important to us than Jesus; some of these, in themselves, are good – family, work, leisure – but they can get in the way of people exploring faith or finding faith in Jesus and then we choose to ignore Jesus and pay no attention to Him.

This is a “shaking-up” story. How has Jesus changed your life? The man who came into the wedding came in his old clothes, not his wedding clothes, hadn’t bothered to change! “Though entry to God’s salvation is free for all, it is not without standards, or to be taken lightly.” (France) Because the gospel is about grace and forgiveness, we might think that there is no need for us to change; we can simply carry on with life as we’ve lived it before, careless of any need to take up Jesus’ values and standards, but live in any old way. But the grace of God in the gospel has a demand on us, that we put off the old way of life like putting off an old, dirty set of clothes and that we put on a new life, new qualities, put on Jesus in way we live. *“Finally...” (Philippians 4:8)* Paul gives us one version of the qualities that Jesus wants to see in us; this is a new set of values that Jesus wants to see in us. But it is possible for us to ignore this and go on unchanged from the past and carry on regardless of what Jesus wants.

“Many are...” (Matthew 22:14) A few years ago, at Christmas, I did a very rough counting up of the number of people who had attended an event at which I had been telling something of the story of Jesus, something of the gospel. Between school assemblies and church services, the total was somewhere over a thousand people. As a preacher, you never know how your message is received and how many people take to heart what you say, until they tell you. One thousand people heard the gospel and the message invited all of them to make a response of some kind. How many did? I don’t know, but it will have been less than a thousand. In seventeen years of ministry here, lots of people have heard me tell the story of Jesus and some have stayed and others have not; some have responded well and others have paid no attention. That’s the reality, but Jesus says that that response has consequences. For those who say “yes” to Jesus, the consequence is a banquet of blessings; to those who pay no attention or say “no” that has very different consequences and Jesus alone is the judge of people’s hearts.

How has Jesus changed your life? Here is what we need to do. First of all, we need to listen, to pay attention to Jesus, for His good and comforting words and for His challenging, disturbing words; that is the first step in Jesus changing us, listen to what He has to say. Then secondly, we need to put off all the old attitudes and ways and put on the new attitudes and ways, attitudes and ways that reflect Jesus and His kingdom values and live by them. We find that so hard to do and how many Christians are barely distinguishable from others in the world; we say “Jesus is Lord” but our values are not Jesus’ values, our ways are not Jesus’ ways; our clothes are not wedding clothes, or kingdom clothes! Pay attention to Jesus; be the kind of people Jesus wants. It all comes with an invitation to a banquet of blessings!

“He was despised and rejected by men...” (Isaiah 53:3) The consequences of that rejection – for Jesus, He would die on a cross by the end of the week in which this conversation took place; for the Jews who despised and rejected Him, their temple was destroyed in AD70, an event seen by many as a judgement of God on their sin! For people who say “yes” to Jesus, there is a banquet of blessings. How has Jesus changed your life?