

Ordinary 28A: A table prepared
Isaiah 25.1-9 | Matthew 22.1-14

I wonder if you noticed the reference to aliens in our first reading from Isaiah? “The palace of aliens is a city no more,” and “When the...noise of aliens [was] like heat in a dry place.”

These are not references to strange green creatures from outer space. The most recent Bible translation translates aliens as “foreigners,” and that gets us closer to the meaning. But it’s important to know that in this passage, the negative reference to aliens, or foreigners, is coming from a place of Israel having been oppressed and stripped bare by invading foreign forces. This is a scripture that promises relief to those who have been displaced by empire. It’s not intended to soothe the anxieties of people who are uncomfortable with migrants, or who don’t like hearing visitors to “their” country speaking different languages.

So with that in mind, let’s dwell with this song of praise and the vision of a coming restoration. Isaiah celebrates and exalts God, because the city that was full of pitiless and well-defended occupiers has crumbled to a heap, and the poor and helpless have been given a refuge and a shelter. It’s not clear whether this refers to a specific incident in history, or whether Isaiah is saying that casting down the ruthless and sheltering the needy is an ongoing pattern of God’s activity in the world. Either way, we can see that the ways of God are aligned with the poor, with those who are vulnerable to cruel weather and the hatred of the powerful.

Isaiah then goes on to prophesy a much more comprehensive victory of God – a feast for all peoples, nations gathered onto God’s holy mountain, the destruction of death itself, the wiping away of tears and disgrace.

Instead of the peoples of the earth being separated by conflict and violence, God’s desire and plan is to draw them together peaceably.

The imagery of the banquet is used throughout the Bible to get this vision across. Instead of the nations having to compete for resources, at God's table the food is all laid on, and everyone's invited to come as equals, as guests, to receive the abundant gifts that God provides: rich food filled with marrow, a feast of well-aged wines strained clear. The best there is.

The sad irony of this picture is that the feast on God's holy mountain was meant to come through a nation bound to God in love and devotion – God's chosen people were meant to be the beacon and foretaste of this day of salvation.

And yet, by the time we get to the feast imagery of Matthew's parable of the wedding banquet, it is clear that the religious and political leaders of Israel were falling badly short of the mark. In their attitudes to the poor and outcast, and in their contempt for Jesus, the Jerusalem power structure was behaving more like the "ruthless, strong people" of Isaiah's prophecy.

Jesus tells this story the day after he arrives in Jerusalem, when his conflict with the chief priests and other Jewish religious leaders was really hotting up. The parable suggests that those who reject the king's invitation to the feast and violently mistreat his messengers will bring down calamity not only on their own heads, but on the whole city.

Matthew's first hearers would have recently lived through the destruction of Jerusalem by Roman forces, which happened in AD70. It's possible that the imagery of a "burned city" is referencing that event. So while the violence of the story is troubling, it makes a kind of sense if we see it as an attempt to comprehend the wreckage of Jerusalem.

However, the promise of the banquet remains, with its scope now vastly widened to include all the people of the streets, both good and bad.

Here we see the creativity and persistence of God in continuing to offer this great feast to all peoples despite the collusion of the priests and leaders of Israel with the powers of war and oppression. God is finding another way to bring about that beautiful vision given to Isaiah.

In our world today, many cities are burning, and many leaders of nations reject God's call to feast at a table of peace. Powerful people would rather fight than gratefully steward the good gifts of creation. Violent competition for land and resources is pushing more and more people into misery. Millions of displaced people know what it is to suffer "the blast of the ruthless like a winter rainstorm." In our own country, people who live vulnerable and precarious lives are being even further marginalised by politicians who would rather curry favours with millionaires than provide shelter for the destitute. Both here and abroad, many of the people making these decisions identify as Christians.

And still, God reaches out to this world with an invitation to feast on God's bounty and with the promise of a future without suffering, tears, or disgrace. This promise that will be won through the crucifixion and resurrection of the rejected Messiah.

The wedding hall of God's banquet is filled with guests who have been brought in from the streets of the city. We are among those guests – those latecomers who got in on the second round of invitations. We weren't brought in because of our spotlessness – the parable makes it clear that the servants gathered "all whom they found, both good and bad."

But while the bar is low, even non-existent, for being invited to the feast, there is some expectation on those who sit at the table. We are asked to put on, and to keep putting on, the wedding robe that marks us out as guests of the king. "We are called to the banquet, but also called to be worthy of its host."¹

¹ Andrew McGowan "Andrew's Version" substack

What is the fabric and shape of that wedding garment? It is cloth woven of compassion, especially towards the poor. It is trimmed with humility that receives all we have as the gift of God, rather than competing and jostling for high places and more of the pie. The cut of the wedding robe is a relationship of devotion and attentiveness to God and faithfulness and courage in responding to God's call. And the pattern of the fabric is a steadfast hope in the vision of the prophets for a renewed heaven and earth.

We have to keep brushing off our invitation to the great feast and choose to keep believing in that Day when God will finally defeat our enemies of death and suffering. And we must live like people who have experienced for ourselves what it's like to have a table set before us in the presence of those same enemies. We are asked to trust that with the Lord as our shepherd we will be given what we need, even when the way is dark.

The promise of that great feast on the holy mountain is woven into our lives now, in Christ, but it has also not yet come to pass. The discipleship that is represented by the wedding garment includes lending our strength and our gifts to God's work of providing refuge, shelter, peace and plenty for all. God will do these things – the plan is faithful. But we who are already guests at the feast can't afford to be complacent – this is not the time to put our feet up, but to actively follow the Son whose wedding banquet this is. Let the taste of God's goodness spur us on to make the holy mountain a reality here and now in all the ways we can.

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