

Many v Few

3 9 17

Almighty and everlasting God,
you are always more ready to hear than we to pray
and to give more than either we desire or deserve:
pour down upon us the abundance of your mercy,
forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid
and giving us those good things,
 which we are not worthy to ask
but through the merits and mediation
of Jesus Christ your Son our Lord.

Our text may be found in the gospel according to Matthew, chapter 22, verse 14

‘... many are called but few are chosen.’

Normally, my sermons are focussed around a text taken from one of the four set readings for the day. In the last couple of years in Lent and Advent, I have tried the idea of sponsored sermons in which you chose a text you'd like me to explore. Today, September 3rd, my 68th birthday, my present to you is the text David Boggis has asked me to explore. And, I want to say, he has not chosen an easy text on which to preach.

Why is it so hard to clarify ? Because what it seems to be saying flies in my understanding of the nature and character of the God we worship, the God who

loves us and wants us to love him too; the God who is pictured as the father of the Prodigal Son who sees his son coming home tired, dirty, smelly, barefoot, in rags, and rushes out to meet him on the road and hugs him to him.

So how can we make sense of it? Well context is everything. It comes at the end of the 'Parable of the Wedding Banquet'. The king's son is to be married and invitations are dispatched and they are ignored, treated with indifference and contempt, mistreating and sometimes even killing the servants who bear the invitation. The king reacts accordingly, properly punishing those who have acted reprehensibly, and then, in their place, ordinary folk, beyond the social pale, are invited in. One such does not have proper clothes for the wedding and he is promptly kicked out into the outer darkness. And then our text: '**... many are called but few are chosen.**'

So how can we make sense of what seems a rather unkind view of God if he is the King depicted in the parable? The clue lies in the parable's intended audience. Well, of course, it is us who read today; it is those who've read it in the past; but it is also the audience that Matthew identifies at the end of the previous chapter and the start of chapter 22. They are the chief priests and Pharisees. Let me quote Matthew 21 v45 and 46 in full: '**When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they knew he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.**' And the parable that Jesus had just told was the 'Parable of the Vineyard', a clear warning to those who thought the promised land of Israel was rightly theirs to do with as they wished.

So if the Jewish religious establishment is Jesus' target audience, what is he trying to say to them ? To the Pharisees on the one hand and to the Sadducees on the other, Jesus is clearly saying that you may think you are in the right with God, you may believe that God has chosen you because you keep yourselves separate, kosher according to your interpretation of Torah, but I tell you that God rejects you because, hard-of-heart, you fail to listen to his messengers and even go out of your way to kill them. In this sense, the text: '**... many are called but few are chosen.**' is a specific warning to the self-righteous who think they've got it right, and is not meant to be applicable to people in general. The religious establishment at the time of Jesus may think they are being called but few of them will be accepted because they are stiff-necked and will not accept the necessary yoke that God is offering them through his Son, Jesus Christ.

Oh, and the poor bloke that's not properly dressed who's kicked out into the outer darkness ? I'm guessing that it was his choice. A suitable wedding robe would have been offered him as a matter of course but his failure to wear one was down to his refusal to take the free gift of God.

So what am I trying to say of our text: '**... many are called but few are chosen.**' That it flies in the face of my understanding of the possibility of universal salvation for all – if only we desire to be saved and have the humility to accept that salvation. We are free to choose and can choose our own damnation if we are stupid enough but, here, our text is aimed at a specific audience – those who, full of pride and smugness, reject Jesus in the first place and fail to come home to him.

May we have the grace to do so.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,

Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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G: Sermons 36 :Many v Few

