

**Sermon for Sunday 15 October 2023 (Rev Phil Wootton)**  
**Matthew 22: 1-14 & Isaiah 25: 1-9 – *Invitation and Vision***

*Whether in joyful expectation or filled with uncertainty, however you come, enter this place to find peace.... Come as you are, join with God's people, in faith, in doubt, in strength, in weakness, in need, with much to give.* These are the words with which we open our current service, and I know from conversation, many people find them helpful. Whatever emotional state we may be in; however strong or weak in faith we feel; however confident or fearful ... we know our place is here, and we want others to find that same reassurance too.

It's a message that reflects today's Gospel – the king's invitation to his son's wedding banquet. The 'save-the-date' messages have already gone out, and now, the messengers go again: 'Today is the day. Come to the wedding feast.' But they don't come. With lives full of business and busy-ness, they just haven't got time. So, the servants get a second errand: 'Go out on the streets. Bring them all in here, whoever they are. Fill my hall with feasting and dancing. All shall find their place here.'

It's a parable of welcome and inclusivity, a popular message today. It's worth putting ourselves in different places in the story, identifying with different people. If we identify with 'the great unwashed' (as it were) who got the final invitation, then we are overwhelmed by the grace that allows us in. If we identify with the servants taking the invitations, we have some learning to do: learn to accept rejection, even violent rejection, to our kindly-meant offer. The learning is also about opening our eyes to people it hadn't occurred to us to contact; that a poor initial response may be because we were going to the wrong people. If we also see ourselves amongst the first group of invitees – presumably the religious of Jesus' day – we ask ourselves if there are no elements of God's invitation to us that we choose to put in the recycling bin?

Something else is disturbing about this parable: there's a worrying amount of violence. First, those who'd rejected the invitation get their whole city wiped out – sounds more than a bit petulant! Then there's the guy at the end who's got the dress-code wrong and ends up being tied hand and foot and ejected into the darkness. A bit harsh, to say the least! Well, you can explain these problems away historically and culturally, but these lines are there for a reason. To reject God's invitation is a serious business. You're turning down the offer of life in all its fullness! And to be clothed right really matters – not going to Moss Bros, but, as the Bible puts it, to be clothed in justice, righteousness, mercy and truth. That's what people should see of us. Unfortunately, too often the church is perceived as intolerant of people but tolerating unacceptable behaviour – racism, sexism, homophobia etc. Yes, come as you are, but we all need to expect to be changed, to have new robes to wear. If our vision is one of open invitation, then realise we've got to sort ourselves out first!

We've been seeking vision for our churches. In August, about 35 of us spent a morning at the Church of the Good Shepherd to explore ideas, which have been written up and reported to the PCC, and now I'm bringing them to our congregations. It was a very open process, and produced lots of ideas and aspirations rather than a single vision or focus. The feedback is to give a flavour of the responses, although some points will be the view of a single individual. First, we looked at where we are now, our Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. This SWOT analysis highlights a lot of strengths, for which we give thanks, plenty of opportunities, with a smaller number of identified weaknesses. The Threats list is reassuringly short, but nevertheless significant. With so many ideas about, the threat of over-committing and burn-out is very real. Some years ago, one of the marks of a healthy church was identified as, 'does a few things well.' Prioritising is important. Stopping doing things can be as worthwhile as starting something fresh.

So, to the future, in two broad categories: The first are **operational** matters – just how we operate as churches. Two things I want to pick out from this: AV at Good Shepherd – at long last, plans are moving forward, currently with the diocese for permission. Second, in communication: we've really got to get our heads around building a real social media presence. That's how most of our neighbours 'do' invitation these days! PCC has agreed that since we can't identify anyone in the church with the capacity to do it, we will seek to employ someone on our behalf.

Now let's move on to the important part – what's been labelled as **strategic**. Four particular areas have been identified: Young People; Community Engagement; Worship and Discipleship. YOUNG PEOPLE – children, families, teens, and adults younger than ourselves! Many here have a passion for engaging with young people and are deeply concerned about our aging congregations. It may surprise you that this is already where we are most active, even though you don't see it on a Sunday morning. Two strands in action: first, *Criss-Cross*, fun, food, story and worship monthly on a Sunday afternoon. We do not need another initiative but time to get this truly embedded so these families feel they belong as a church community. Secondly, schools work, through which large number of children are touched by the Christian faith. Our work with the Christ Church Infants and Junior Schools is extensive and must be maintained. Our vision is to extend elsewhere, as opportunity allows, with Castlecroft Primary School a priority. Our third strand is more aspiration: we'd love to develop a community choir, starting in school and coming to incorporate parents as well.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: I have to say that is the most vague area as things stand. There are some specific proposals that may help raise our profile in the community. And there's general aspiration to promote justice and care for the environment, and to serve those in need. What that means in practice needs much further work. Hearing today's reading from Isaiah should inspire us: 'You have been a haven for the poor and a refuge for the oppressed.' Are we? How can we?

WORSHIP: Worship is recognised as a strength and something we need to keep on developing and refreshing. The challenge, I think, is both to be of broader appeal and to encourage deeper engagement. Music is key, but opinions are mixed! We all like different things. A specific idea was to develop Sunday Praise as a 'relaxed' service which encourages those with neuro-diversity. The PCC has agreed to the establishment of a Parish Worship Committee – people from both churches working together on the development of our services and practices of worship. The first meeting is on Thursday 26 October at 7.30pm. If you're interested, please have a word.

Finally, DISCIPLESHIP: probably the area with fewest responses, but not least important – opportunities to study and deepen faith through courses, Bible study, discussion etc. And **Prayer**: over the last few weeks I have approached about the need for more focussed prayer – different people, different concerns. 'We need to pray for our services.' 'We need to pray for children and youth work.' 'We need to think how we pray for individuals in our intercessions.' Let's get serious about prayer.

I have no single vision for our churches, but the word *INVITATION* sums up more than most – the invitation to young and old; invitation to worship with heart and soul and voice; invitation to us to attend more deeply to the needs of our community; to be more purposeful in prayer. In the end, it's God's invitation to his kingdom that truly matters, one that's reflected in our call to Communion in our service today:

*Come to this table, you who have much faith  
and you who would like to have more;  
you who have come here often  
and you who have not been for a long time;  
you who have tried to follow and you who have failed.  
Come. It is Christ who invites us to meet him here.*