

What Upsets God
28th Sunday, Year A
Matthew 22: 1-14
9 October 2011

One of the more memorable couples we have had in our 9.30 congregation in recent times has been the eco warriors Matthew Luxon and Waveney Warth. You may recall the national publicity surrounding their no household rubbish for a year experiment.

When I met up with them in Auckland last year they told me an unusual story of almost thwarted hospitality. They had been house sitting for the owner of an expensive and prestigious restaurant owner in Parnell. When they moved to their own place on the north shore he invited them to dinner in what was to be a showcase of his most interesting friends and finest cooking. But somehow there was a miscommunication about when this was to be. So it was that Waveney got a very grumpy phone call from the restaurateur informing her that the food was ready to be served, and where were they? With her husband not available that evening, and although she had already eaten, she tore across the harbour bridge, and then had to force down a multi course dinner of rich food, while trying to be both suitably apologetic and sparkling in conversation at the same time.

I have had the experience of having food on the table and dinner guests not turning up as expected so I can resonate with the strong reaction of the King in this morning's story of the wedding banquet that was snubbed by the invited guests. But there is an unusual feature to the way Matthew tells the story, one that is missing in Luke's version of it. It is the tone of urgency and bitter anger. The King doesn't

receive the news of his rejected hospitality with calm dignity and stoic resignation. He is furious, and takes immediate and drastic action, widening the guest list with scandalous and coercive intent. And even when dinner finally gets under way with the motley crew who have been dragged in, the King is still throwing his weight around because he is not happy with the way one of the guests is comporting himself.

The hearers of this story would have got the message right away. The religious elite knew this was aimed at them. The sceptical crowds too would have realised that there was a certain shotgun blast widening of the field of fire dimension to this tale, designed to include them also. But what are we to make of this story as it is told into a very different situation?

It is the King's bitter anger that interests me as a comment on the character of the God we are dealing with. And the dragnet approach to filling up the dinner places has got me thinking about the salvation strategy that God is deploying in our world.

How can we reconcile this fired up, passionately angry response of the King to his thwarted hospitality plans at the feast of life with the immutable and impassible God of traditional orthodox Christian theology? My mother had a saying designed to stop our hot reactions to intra family provocations – “don't descend to their level dear.” That is what the Patristic Fathers were getting at when they described God as being immutable and impassible. God won't allow himself to become a prisoner of human agendas and complicated relationship tangles. In order to help

the human race he has to avoid getting wound up by the messes it gets itself into. He is a God who doesn't change – his intentions towards us are constant with our best interests at heart. So he is clear, calm, and reliable in his dealings with us. In this way he is useful to us.

What is more a God who became passionately over identified with our situation would cease to be God. The more he emoted and became mired in the human situation the more limited and needy he would become. It would be like the scriptwriter in Coronation Street becoming a character in the soap, and thereby losing the objectivity to write the story. The God who rules the universe, and who has a rich inner life in himself, doesn't need us to be himself, or to be happy.

In our time this view of God has come under sharp attack. Some of the great horrors of the 20th century have led to theologians trying to get God off the hook of having apparently done nothing to stop them by arguing that he was completely identified with the victims of these atrocities. So God apparently was gassed in Auschwitz in solidarity with millions of Jews. We have heard a variation of this argument recently in Christchurch – God didn't cause the earthquake, but he is there in the helping that puts people's lives back together again. As you can tell I am not convinced by this argument.

But those who have got it in for the immutable and impassible God are on more solid ground when they turn to the pages of Scripture that describe a God who responds passionately to developments in salvation history, particularly when God's people lose the plot and turn away from their Covenant responsibilities. Grief and anger and jealous love

are the emotions the prophets report about the God who is beside himself over the apostasies of his chosen people. In a sense today's gospel story stands at the tale end of a long line of vivid descriptions of what happens when Divine love is rejected.

I have called this sermon "What upsets God." The answer couldn't be clearer. It is when the people he was counting on let him down. More particularly it is when people who ought to know a thing or two about God respond to his invitations to a deeper union with him with a calculating self-interest and insulation strategy that seeks to keep him at arms length, while taking full advantage of the privileges that are associated with being his friends. He gives himself utterly, without reserve, in a self-emptying generous love, and he is staggered when those who have been schooled in the ways of Divine love react in a blasé or dismissive manner.

So can what we do affect God, sway him, have an emotional impact on him? Our adoration and devotion and heartfelt requests can – that is what intercessory prayer is all about. To some extent we are allowed to tug on his heartstrings in this way. And when Jesus came among us his identification with us was complete enough to open up God to the nastier aspects of human existence. As Balthasar put it, "Sin killed him so that he could kill sin." To some extent sin, death and suffering was allowed in to God's being so that he could neutralise it. That side of God that is turned to the human race with saving intent took the brunt of all that in order to deal with it, while the inner life of God continued in tranquillity.

For there is what has been called a super impassibility about God. He could allow sin and death to touch his Divine being without being dominated or coerced by it. He can be angry at the rejection of his love without allowing it to cloud his judgement or to behave unfairly. He can allow us to influence his actions in the world, without relinquishing the Divine prerogative to have the last word in human affairs. He can pray through us when we turn to him in prayer, without cancelling out human freedom.

Nor is he passive and at our mercy in the way the story of salvation plays out. That part of this morning's story in which the messengers were sent out in to the highways and the byways to compel people to come in is a reassurance to us that his sure touch will not allow human rejection to overturn his saving intentions. His ability to outflank, outwit and outthink human short sightedness, sloth and stupidity means that all will be well in the end.

“Be angry but sin not,” it says in the Scriptures. That is the way God is. His wrath is in fact his purifying love that will not let us go on in our folly, but confronts us to save us. He is magisterial in his overseeing of the human story. And he is warm hearted in a way that redefines what closeness and compassion really means. When he tells me that the meal is on the table I will move to my dinner place smartly.