Reflection for St James, October 11

You could take this story at face value if you wanted, but if you did, you would be left with a big problem.

There was a man dragged in off the streets, not in a wedding garment, who was bound and thrown out into outer darkness. It is completely unreasonable, unjustifiable and unacceptable.

So let’s dig deeper. These stories were not written down for generations. They were in the hands of storytellers, important people in a society without books. Storytellers are artists. They know how to tell a good story and they know how to relate it to their audience. Every storyteller who inherits a story makes it their own, and changes it.

The story Jesus told was no doubt designed to stir things up. He thought, the religious leaders, his own people, were turning their back on God’s invitation and that their place should be taken by others.

Now listeners in the early Church would have understood this and it would have been overlaid with their own experience of being thrown out of the synagogues and their belief that Jesus was God in action and word rejected and their invitation to join their fellowship spurned.

Earlier in the lockdown I was reading a novel by Christos Tsiocolkas called Damascus. It’s the story of Paul. It’s a remarkable evocation of the ancient world. The writer has Paul entering a city in the Roman empire, describing the bustle, the squalor and the violence all around him alongside the temples and grandeur of Rome.

Hidden in the back streets, he finds a small congregation of Christians, watchful, fearful, wary, but bound by a faith in Jesus as lord. Secretly, they break bread together and pass the cup of wine round. Their faith and their fellowship are their only strength in a dangerous city and world. Yet as they break bread together, they know that they are guests at the banquet of the Lord, and what could be better than that?

I recommend Damascus to you. I’d always pictured Paul like some Cambridge don, sitting writing his letters neatly in his study. This novel evokes the ancient world in all its complex, dirty, violent reality and Paul had to navigate its dangerous realities.

But back to the story of the wedding feast. There are two versions in the Gospels, Matthew’s and Luke’s. Luke’s version ends with: “For I tell you none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.”

But Matthew goes on to describe the hapless guest without a wedding garment who was thrown out.

Imagine that little fellowship listening, their security at being an invited guest at the Lord’s table suddenly punctured by this challenge. Are they worthy to be here? The wedding garment represents authentic discipleship and challenges the listener to ask am I a genuine disciple? Am I trustworthy? Am I without guile or pretence responding to God’s invitation in Jesus?

So Matthew’s story of the wedding feast isn’t as arbitrary as it first seems and the man without a wedding garment is there for a purpose to challenge us never to become complacent. We have to be worthy of our place. So often there is a sting in the tale, a hard saying – anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

And yet this is only half the story in Jesus’s vision. Along with the challenge there is always comfort – “Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.”

And it strikes me that in the middle of this pandemic, God wants to reach out to us in comfort rather than in challenge. There is enough challenge and threat and danger in day to day living now.

To make my point perfectly here’s a guest who doesn’t think he’s worthy to be here in George Herbert’s wonderful poem “Love Bade me Welcome”.

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back,

                              Guilty of dust and sin.

But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack

                             From my first entrance in,

Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,

                             If I lacked any thing.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:

                             Love said, You shall be he.

I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,

                             I cannot look on thee.

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,

                             Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame

                             Go where it doth deserve.

And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?

                             My dear, then I will serve.

You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:

                             So I did sit and eat

A place like Cambridge has a long memory and it’s not difficult to think back to the time of the Black Death. After all, three of its colleges, Clare, Trinity Hall and Gonville and Caius were founded in response to the Black Death. Up the road Norwich was particularly badly hit. It is estimated that in 1349 two-fifths of the population of about six thousand had dies. One of the survivors was Julian of Norwich who was six at the time. At the age of 30, she became seriously ill but recovered. On her sick bed she had a number of visions or “shewings” which she later wrote down in a book called Revelations of Divine Love.

When a saintly clergy friend who had looked after me in my early days was very ill, I sent him a little booklet of Julian of Norwich’s writings called Enfolded in Love. He told me later that it was the only thing he could read and what a comfort it was. Remembering what Julian of Norwich had seen and experienced it is all the more extraordinary that one of the sayings she believed God had given her was “All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well. These words were said so kindly and without a hint of blame to me.”

In her visions, God is both father and mother: “I am the strength and goodness of fatherhood. I am the wisdom of motherhood. It is I who teach you to love.”

She wrote: “Though there is such pain, trouble and distress that it seems we are unable to think of anything except how we are and what we feel.” And yet “He did not say you shall not be tempest-tossed, you shall not be work-weary, you shall not be discomfited but he said you shall not be overcome. God wants us to heed these words so that we shall always be strong in trust both in sorrow and in joy.”

She wrote: “As the body is clad in clothes and the flesh in skin and the bones in flesh and the heart in the whole so are we clothed body and soul in the goodness of God and enfolded in it. We are enfolded in love.”

And for everyone who is isolated and lonely, or ill, or in hospital or dying, for all doctors and nurses and helpers who are drained and exhausted, for all freshers who are locked down and disorientated, for all who are unemployed or fear it, for all who are trying to tackle this pandemic nationally or locally or those of us who are just trying to get through then Julian of Norwich’s words which come from no sunny uplands but the grim reality of medieval Norwich can speak profoundly to each of us. We are enfolded in love.