

ON DOING TRUTHFUL THINGS WELL¹

A sermon preached by Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the 20 Sunday after Pentecost, 15 October 2023

Bev and I recently had the pleasure of seeing the Sydney Theatre Company's outstanding production of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Early in the play, Jack Worthing explains to his friend, Algernon Moncrieff, why he has constructed an elaborate falsehood to cover his frequent visits to London.

JACK.

My dear Algy, I don't know whether you will be able to understand my real motives. You are hardly serious enough. When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It's one's duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes. That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple.

ALGERNON.

The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!²

I must confess that the comments about truth being rarely pure and never simple occur to me frequently when I am confronted by the lectionary readings for my sermons.

Wilde is also frequently quoted as saying:

If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing well. If it is worth having, it is worth waiting for. If it is worth attaining, it is worth fighting for. If it is worth experiencing, it is worth putting aside time for.

Although I like this quotation, it doesn't seem to be in Wilde's style, and I can't find it in his works. In an 1885 essay,³ he quotes the first sentence from the artist and serial poisoner, Thomas Griffiths Wainewright,⁴ who was transported to Tasmania in 1837. The rest of the alleged quotation never appears anywhere. If you can identify it, please let me know.

Today, I find myself between two important personal anniversaries. Last Monday, 9 October, marked the 40th anniversary of my first Anglican sermon, preached here in 1983. It was about Elijah's healing of the leper, Naaman the Syrian, and Jesus's healing of the ten lepers. Next Tuesday, 17 October, marks the 58th anniversary of my 1965 ordination as a Methodist minister. As I stand in this pulpit today, I reflect on the complexity of truth and the trials of things worth doing. I have been a preacher since my late teens. Preaching was a central part of my theological education and preaching is the centre of my ministry here.

On the 10th anniversary of my first sermon, I began by saying:

¹ Readings: Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 20-24; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

² [The Project Gutenberg eBook of The Importance of Being Earnest, by Oscar Wilde](#)

³ [Pen, Pencil, And Poison - A Study In Green by Oscar Wilde \(wilde-online.info\)](#)

⁴ [Thomas Griffiths Wainewright - Wikipedia](#)

If you look over my shoulder, you will see the crucifix that hangs behind the pulpit. It hangs there on account of Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians that his task is to proclaim Christ crucified.⁵ It is a warning to preachers of their central task and of the danger of self-indulgence to which all preachers are liable. Its presence there reminds me of some lines from Kevin Hart's poem, 'A Silver Crucifix upon My Desk',

Once,
I put you behind me, and all day
I felt your long, torn look
upon my back.⁶

This may not be every preacher's experience, but when I stand in the pulpit of this church, it is mine.⁷

Today's gospel is the third of Matthew's parables that focus on those who reject the call of God. Two Sundays ago, had it not been Michael and All Angels and Confirmation we would have had the parable of the two sons who responded differently to their father's command to work in the vineyard.⁸ Last Sunday it was the parable of the wicked tenants.⁹ Today we have the parable of the wedding feast. The basic message of these three parables is the same. There are people who hear the call and reject it. There are those who respond appropriately. In each case those who reject the call are the ones who should have accepted it. Those who ultimately respond are always those who were not expected to do so.

A gentler version of today's parable appears in Luke, but the Matthew version has two features that disturb modern readers. They are the reaction of the king to the refusal of the invited guests to come and the rejection of the guest without the wedding garment. The first feature repels us by its unnecessary and exaggerated violence. After all, having your house burnt down is a bit much for not accepting an invitation to a wedding. We must all be pleased that it hasn't taken on generally! The second feature offends us by being unfair. If you are dragged into the feast from the street, how can you be expected to have your best clothes on? These features should not be taken at face value, they are literary devices designed to highlight the importance of the story.

The violent reaction of the king to the refusal of his invited guests to come to the banquet is partly accounted for by Matthew's choice of the identity of the host. To refuse an invitation to the wedding of the king's son amounts to high treason. In this way Matthew heightens the importance of the invitation and makes it impossible for his readers to escape the clear point of the parable. This is a parable about the invitation to join the kingdom of God. Refuse the invitation and you are in deep trouble. But it also includes a reference to the fall of the city of Jerusalem to the Emperor Titus in 70 AD. Matthew's gospel was probably written shortly after the year 80 AD when the memory of this event was still very fresh in the minds of the Jewish

⁵ 1 Corinthians 1: 23, 2: 1-2.

⁶ Kevin Hart, 'A Silver Crucifix upon My Desk', in Les A Murray (ed.), *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry*, Blackburn, Collins Dove, 1986, pp. 143-4.

⁷ Saint James' Church on the Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time, 10 October 1993. Readings: Isaiah 25: 6-9; Psalm 23; Philippians 4: 12-20; Matthew 22: 1-14. I said of my first sermon: "My lay reader's licence from the Archbishop was issued on 8 September 1983 and on the 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time, 9 October, I preached here on the readings for the day, the healing of Naaman the Syrian by the prophet Elisha and the healing of the ten lepers by Jesus." (2 Kings 5: 10-17; Luke 17: 11-19.)

⁸ Matthew 21: 28-32.

⁹ Matthew 21: 33-44.

Christians for whom Matthew was writing.¹⁰ The historian Josephus, who participated in the events as the commander of a group of Jewish rebels in Galilee, described the fall of Jerusalem in a manner that is reminiscent of the Nazi destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto in the Second World War:

. . . the Roman army encompassed the city when it was full of inhabitants. . . the Romans slew some of them, some they carried captives, and others they searched for underground, and when they found where they were, they broke up the ground and slew all they met with. . . [A]s soon as the army had no more people to slay or to plunder, because there remained none to be the objects of their fury, . . . Caesar gave orders that they should now demolish the entire city and temple.¹¹

The fate of those who refused to hear God's word and, moreover, persecuted Christian preachers, was, in Matthew's view, plain for all to see.

What about the poorly clad guest? Some scholars suggest that it was customary to give wedding attire to the guests as they entered the feast, so the person who failed to put it on was both ungrateful and dishonoured the occasion, their host, and his son. Others regard the story as a separate parable that was inserted here to highlight a problem experienced by the early church. Paul notes that some of the baptised, who regarded themselves as free from the Jewish law, also thought themselves free from any moral law.¹² The warning is subtly conveyed by the reproachful use of the word 'friend' with which the king addresses his guest. It evokes the idea of one who should have been faithful but was not. This is a parable about responsiveness and responsibility.

As Andrew McGowan has said:

The fate meted out for lack of a garment indicates that some are present, even among the second group of invitees, who may not ultimately remain. Matthew thus seems to be challenging complacency about Christian belonging and commitment, as well as cautioning any smugness about the fate of Jerusalem. . . . Belonging to the Church as a mere social fact will not be enough (regardless of who has been displaced), for discipleship requires our real commitment and evidence.¹³

This brings us back to where we began. Telling the truth, that is, what we understand to be the will of God, is rarely pure and never simple. We face challenging confrontations, not only from outside our faith tradition, but from within it. Speaking the truth as clearly as we can is dangerous. But, if it is worth doing, it is worth doing well.

The issue of my spiritual life, and of yours, is at one level, whether we will respond to the invitation to the great banquet, symbolised in this parable and by this Eucharist. But beyond that, how will we translate that response into a practice that encompasses our whole life? How will we make our faith and our life a unity? There are no easy answers to these questions, and it is a foolish preacher who proposes to lecture a congregation about what they should do individually. As well as being a less than foolish preacher, I hope to be wise enough to say that it is our task to answer these questions together in the life of our parish. We have a common task and, like the unexpected guests at the wedding, must don our festal garments and celebrate

¹⁰ see Herman Hendrickx, *The Parables of Jesus*, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1986, p. 125.

¹¹ Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, Books 6 & 7, in *The Works of Josephus*, translated by W Wiston, Peabody, Hendrickson Publishers, 1987, pp. 749-50. [The Wars of the Jews by Flavius Josephus \(gutenberg.org\)](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16666/16666-h/16666-h.htm)

¹² J Jeremais, *Rediscovering the Parables*, London, Macmillan, 1966, p. 53. Romans 3.8; 6.1; Jude 4.

¹³ [The Wedding Banquet - by Andrew McGowan - Andrew's Version \(substack.com\)](http://www.substack.com/p/the-wedding-banquet-by-andrew-mcgowan)

together. And, if we cast a side glance at our reading from Exodus, we must not be diverted by false gods.

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see;
And what I do in anything
To do it as for thee!¹⁴

¹⁴ George Herbert, 'The Elixir', *The New English Hymnal*, No. 456. [The Elixir by George Herbert | Poetry Foundation](#)



Icon of the Wedding Banquet

Note the party hats and the guest being cast out on the right!