

Whilst Paul is most undoubtedly the foremost mover of the early Christian Church, it is probably important to grasp that a lot of what he says in his letters to the emerging churches is not necessarily for us. For instance, he talks of the two arguing women, Euodia and Syntyche (who are they?) and the people he hopes will be able to reconcile the situation in Philippi, one named Clement and the other Syzygus, who's name has been translated, strangely perhaps, from the Greek into 'companion' in this version. (Again... who?)

But the more general entreaties of Paul *are* more accessible to us. At first sight, today's epistle has some surprises, not the least of which is that it contains a passage that appears to be full of rejoicing; "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice" - party time even. But this is Paul, that supposedly grumpy man - if it's fun, it is surely sinful.

At the age of about 4 or 5, I kicked up a huge fuss to join the local church choir (where my father already sang); the sub-text, I seem to remember, was to avoid the Sunday School which was run by a seriously scary harridan of a woman who had a few strands of hair in a comb-over style seen on some bald men and blackened decaying teeth (it's funny how memory can play fanciful tricks). Anyway, the ploy was successful and so started my lifelong relationship with church music, taking in many choirs including three cathedral choirs and a choral scholarship. I only gave up singing a couple of years ago when my voice broke for the second time. The upshot of this is that this passage I have known off by heart for as long as I can remember, long before I discovered where it came from or grasped its possible meanings. Years ago, I sang the Purcell setting of these words (aka The Bell Anthem) in an octet at a friend's wedding in a very small church in Dorset - this is a long verse anthem with all the sections repeated and musical interludes between them. The bride had reached the altar rail in the middle of a very long organ introduction even before we had even started singing. About 10 minutes later and approaching the end of the piece (with the congregation still on their feet), we got to the bit where we sang "Again I say rejoice; and again...again I say rejoice" and an imperious mother of the bride stage whispered "Not again - Surely not again"

The key word in this epistle, though, is 'near', or 'at hand' (the Lord is at Hand); the Greek word is εγγυς which means 'nearby' both in time and space - 'here and now' in other words. We cannot imagine that Paul meant εγγυς to be in the region of 2000 years hence or thereabouts when he wrote it. Similarly, Jesus had said to his disciples, somewhere about the year AD32 or so, that they would 'See the son of man coming in a cloud with power and glory' and also that 'You will not have gone through all the towns of Judea,' and 'this generation will not pass away' before they see the Son of man coming in glory. If one is to accept the Gospels as 'gospel', then the disciples have seen the son of man coming in clouds of glory already, some one thousand, nine hundred and eighty years ago (ish). Remember, we use the notion of clouds in an idiomatic sense too, such as 'He's got his head in the clouds' or 'She's on cloud nine'. Why shouldn't the biblical writers use figures of speech as well?

Paul clearly expected this to be a contemporary event. "Do not worry about anything", he says, but this is perhaps better translated as "Be anxious about nothing" because he means '**nothing**'. No marriage or children; no working for food or shelter; no further expansion of the church in Philippi; there's no gain in worrying. All fretting will be pointless as long as they rejoice solely in the Lord because the Parousia (or Second Coming) is going to happen NOW.

So it seems to be a futile exercise for 21st century mankind to await the appearance of that biblical form of celestial transportation; clouds; or the fiery chariot of Elijah; or the vision of aeroplanes found in that extraordinary book Ezeikiel. If this is true, there is no second coming to look forward to as an earthly event.

A 20th century theologian, CH Dodd, to whom I have a connection (one of my university lecturers went to one of his lectures!) held that these eschatological or ‘end of the world’ type teachings do not refer to the future, but instead to the ministry of Jesus and his lasting legacy. After all, only we humans are bound by time and space, not God. The theologians of the second half of the 20th century equipped us to view God and heavenly things in a spiritual sense. Angels do not sit on clouds strumming harps. Heaven is not in the sky. “One day is as a thousand years to the Lord”. God who was, is, and is to come is not bound by, or to, time; past present and future are not separate entities to God – they are all the same thing, a sort of temporal triunity.

So, the second coming has already happened with Jesus’s resurrection and Christ is εγγυς - with us here and now; look around you to find him. As humans we are subject to frailty and the uncertainties and horrors of human existence, and we share in the second coming at the moment of our death when we meet God face to face, no longer seeing him in a mirror darkly.

This is what we must all do – Seek and we will find in a deeply spiritual sense.

I spoke earlier of a wedding; today’s gospel is most relevant too, although that wedding does not seem to be a particularly jolly occasion! .

The context of the wedding parables is within the major controversy Jesus has with the Jewish authorities after his triumphant entry to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and The Cleansing of the Temple where, according to John’s Gospel, he made whips of cord and set about the traders (not a popular move, I should imagine). The chief priests and elders ask Jesus, “By what authority do you do these things?” and Jesus responds with some parables of judgment, which all speak of people who do not live up to expectation and so lose their place of privilege, to be replaced by a more surprising group.

Our Gospel reading for today is actually two parables, often being treated as a single parable because the setting for both is a wedding banquet. Both are allegories—stories in which the various elements (people, things, happenings) have a hidden or symbolic meaning. When dealing with allegories, it is always important not to push interpretation too far. Allegories are used in order to make a point and the focus should be on the intended meaning rather than trying to find significance in every jot and tittle. Even so, it is clear here that the king giving the banquet is God: his son is Jesus: the invited guests are the people of Israel: the first messenger slaves are the Hebrew prophets: the second and third sets of slaves are Christian missionaries: the burned city is Jerusalem: the good and bad are the members of the church, which includes both righteous and unrighteous.

But...a parable is supposed to be a simple story which the hearers can relate to in their everyday lives; this is obviously more than a simple story about a king and a banquet. Jesus would have been very unlikely to relate a story which makes absolutely no sense on an earthly level. How many of you, were you to be invited to, say Prince Harry’s wedding, would refuse

to attend? Worse, when further messengers come to ask again, would you make light of it, or deliberately go away to avoid the invitation? And those of you still at home, would you seize the royal postmen, treat them shamefully and murder them? I think not. And then we are told that the King sends the army to destroy the city – but it's *his* city he's destroying! And more guests are found lurking about in the burning streets and ordered to come – anyone will do! Hmm...

This parable, though, explains why the church includes Gentiles and sinners; understanding this would be important in Matthew's church, it was still primarily Jewish but with a growing Gentile membership. Sinners were not welcome in the synagogues. As a matter of fact, people with physical or mental handicaps were barred, too. The church had found an eager audience among those not welcome elsewhere. It summarizes in story form the relationship of God with the Jewish people and the church. It reminds us that God invites us to a joyful feast, and we miss the joy if we refuse the invitation. It acknowledges that both good and bad fill churches. It also implies a warning. God judged harshly those who refused the invitation. We can assume that God will act in similar fashion if we refuse the invitation to true discipleship now.

Thus the first parable has left its simple roots behind in the retelling over time and the allegorical meaning has been read back into the text. (A clearer idea of what Jesus's original was likely to be can be found in Luke's version in Chapter 14 of his Gospel – no violence here).

As for the wedding clothing, how important is it that the guest is improperly attired, especially after the King has just burned down the city? And surely God will not enforce a dress code! But this parable warns that he will. The lack of a wedding garment represents unpreparedness when the call comes – none of us know the time of our final meeting with God and we must always be ready. But again the parable has shifted into the realms of allegorical meaning - "Bind his hand and foot, take him away, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth". What earthly king trying to run an orderly wedding feast could possibly order such a punishment? But this Gospel includes several references to terrible, eschatological, punishment characterized by weeping and grinding of teeth. In each case, it is Jesus who tells us of such punishment.

The passage's last word? "For many are called, but few are chosen". This is a pithy little saying in the Greek, easy to remember, with a lilting, rhyming rhythm that is lost in translation. Elsewhere in the New Testament, we easily find the idea of calling or election, which suggests that God has chosen (or elected) only certain people for salvation. More precisely, all who have heard the message of Christ are among the many of whom have been called but only the elect have chosen to respond.

And then there is the concept of the whole of the Christian Church being seen as the Bride of Christ. However, the Church is never explicitly called "the bride of Christ" in the New Testament; instead, a major analogy is that of the body. Just as husband and wife are to be "one flesh" this analogy describes the relationship of Christ and Church. Husbands were exhorted to love their wives just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself for it.

So, I now say to every person, earthly mother of the bride or not, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice; again I say rejoice, and again I say rejoice, and again, and again . . . Amen