



Sermon

15th October, 2023

Don't Spurn the Rescuer!

Exodus 32:1-14; Matthew 22:1-14

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Deus ex machina - literally it means, "The god from the machine." It was the device in Greek and Roman plays of having a god intervene in the story. The Roman poet, Horace, strongly criticized writers who, every time a problem occurred in the plot of their play, brought in one of the Roman gods to solve it. Horace declared, "Do not bring a god onto the stage, unless the problem is one that deserves a god to solve it."

Well, in Romans 3, Paul lays out a problem for us which truly requires a god-- particularly the Lord God Almighty -- to solve it: "All have sinned and fallen short of God's glory."

Thank God, though, that He was willing to come onto the stage of human existence, as Jesus Christ of Nazareth, to solve that problem!

Both the passages from Exodus and the Gospel are about relating to God when he is on the stage! In both cases, the people despise God. In both cases God is angry. In both cases, people who have been in some sort of relationship with God, act in a way which despises the life and relationship he has offered them. As a consequence they are separated from him and incur his wrath.

The first is an historical account from the wilderness wanderings of the Hebrews. They are at Mt Sinai. As we heard last week, God declared his commandments from the mountain and the people were so frightened they pleaded that he should speak to them through Moses. So Moses had ascended the mountain to meet with God. When he had been away for almost forty days the people became restless and confronted Aaron who was in charge.

In a tense meeting, they dismissed Moses as 'this fellow who brought us out of Egypt.' They demanded gods they could see - so he made them a calf idol. The people gathered before it to worship and then to feast and that spilled over into sexual immorality. Last week we heard of the Ten Commandments being given to the people. In this act they broke the first, second and probably the seventh of those commandments.

The first commandment declares that it was Yahweh who brought them out of Egypt and they are to have no other gods. So, they declared that the image of an Egyptian bull god had brought them out and they worshipped that god.

The second commandment is not to make an idol and worship it and that is exactly what they did.

The seventh commandment is not to commit adultery and, in their revelry, a word implies sexual immorality, they may well have broken that too.

This was comprehensive disobedience to the covenant they had enthusiastically accepted with the words, "Everything the Lord has said we will do."¹

Such a rejection of him after his rescue of them and offering them life and relationship made him angry. And that was not unreasonable! They showed themselves to be covenant breakers and only too ready to despise Yahweh. If there were no wrath in God at our sins, there would be no need for a saviour. If God were merely

¹ Exodus 24:3

a rule maker and examiner, he would not care for those who broke his rules and there would be no thought of a saviour.

We need to keep in our minds the revelation in the Bible: "God is love."² Whatever God does comes from love – true love, not romanticism or indulgence which masquerade as love. One definition of God's love is that God eternally gives of himself to others³. Since that is His eternal nature, if it does not look like love to us – then we have insufficient information or a distorted perception.

Now you might say, "That is just Old Testament!" But remember the nature of God does not change: God is not a different person in the Old & New Testaments. What has changed is that Jesus has made atonement for sin. At the time of the treasonous behaviour of the Exodus account, not even the Jewish sacrificial system had been instituted. There was no Day of Atonement, no daily sacrifice for sin.

However, let's turn to the New Testament. We know Jesus is loving and kind. The Bible tells us that Jesus is the express image of the invisible God. So if we really want to know what God is like, we can do no better than look at Jesus.

You will remember from the last two weeks, that the context for this parable is the hostile questioning of the religious leaders about his authority to teach and to clear the Temple of the traders and money changers. In the parable of the Wedding Feast, Jesus warns the religious leaders as their rejection of him has become hardened.

Here he tells the story of a king who wants to celebrate the wedding of his son with a party for all his people. He sends out invitations but people refuse to come.

Graciously, the king sends further messengers inviting his subjects but still they refuse. Worse than that they attack the messengers and kill some of them. At this the king is very angry and sends his army to punish those people severely.

The messengers sent to the people are the prophets culminating in Jesus. The people who refuse the message are those who were actively rejecting Jesus and planning his judicial murder.

The king's action of punishing those people who reject his invitation in the story may be a prophetic warning of the coming destruction when the Roman army would besiege Jerusalem, kill large numbers and burn the place.

In the parable, the King is determined to have guests to celebrate with him and so he sends his servants out to collect anyone they can get and they bring back many so that the hall is full. These represent the common folk who did not keep all the law or the rabbinical teachings. Who else is invited in this second round? The gentiles, for when the Jewish people failed to respond to Jesus, the gentiles were called into the kingdom as well. We are part of that motley band, scooped up from the ditches, doorways and ditches to celebrate with the King.

But then the King notices someone at the feast who is not wearing a wedding garment. This is a different insult. Two interpretations are advanced for this part of the parable:

One is that this person simply does not honour the king by wearing appropriate garments. It was only appropriate to dress up to celebrate but this person has chosen not to. This would be a lack of respect.

The other idea is based on the knowledge that wealthy people supplied garments for their guests to wear at weddings and also that clothes are used in scripture as a metaphor for righteousness. Clean garments represent a righteous standing; dirty garments represent unrighteousness.⁴ In that case, the wedding garment

² 1 John 4:5

³ Grudem W., *Systematic Theology*, IVP Leicester, p198

⁴ Isaiah 64:6; Zechariah 3:4

represents the righteousness that God has supplied but this guest has chosen instead to rely on his own righteousness.

As Christians, we can only come into God's presence because Jesus has dealt with the consequence and penalty of our sins. If we try to do it on the basis of our own righteousness (which Paul calls filthy rags) it will be utterly inadequate and we will found wanting in the judgement.

If this sounds harsh, it means we don't understand the reality of sin. Holiness and sin cannot co-exist. If we want to be in relationship with our holy God, there needs to be a way of dealing with our sin.

The wedding guest who fails to wear the provided garment is like a sailor needing to escape from a damaged submarine who refuses to use the escape set provided but insists on climbing out unaided - it's not going to work! The robe of righteousness Jesus gives us is our essential protection. Without it we will not survive the Great Judgement.

We don't like to think too much about judgement and wrath. On the other hand we do like to bask in ideas of God's love and acceptance towards us. That's understandable but it is important to be clear that when we talk about forgiveness there is something to forgive! When we talk about grace it is because there is the need for grace. Without grace and forgiveness we are lost.

The warnings from these two portions of scripture today are that we must not reject the grace of God offered to us and we must follow his way for salvation to be effective not imagining we can mix and match the portions we want.

But let's be very clear that all this is said within the understanding that God is love, He has provided the means of salvation. It is available to us if we will just ask for it. He has poured out his love and grace upon us extravagantly. God is totally for us. We need to understand how important this is and not take it lightly.

As the writer to the Hebrews put it,

We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? ⁵

To return to our starting thought, as characters in a great drama, when there really is the need for an intervention of God (a *deus ex machina*) you had better not turn your nose up at the rescue offered.

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⁵ Hebrews 2:1-3