Matthew 22 Judgement

The top stories on the BBC news site last night were :

A bomb explosion in Somalia

The return to Canada of a family taken hostage in Pakistan

The crash of a cargo plane off the Ivory Coast.

But the most watched was none of these. It was a story about Harvey Weinstein.

Just in case you don’t know who he is. He is a leading Hollywood film director who is alleged to have abused actresses. There has been a great deal said about him and as a result his brother said he should never be allowed back into the film industry.

“He lost his rights,” “He didn’t lose his rights to be rehabilitated as a human being. But as far as being in this town again? I mean, give me a break.” ( The guardian 14.10.2017)

Holly wood is not famous for being a place of moral standards, but in this case, the response has been massive and punitive. And most people would say rightly so. Abuse is not a trivial matter, it will scar a person for life and at worst it will destroy a person life completely. So no wonder the media have gone to town on it, they know that many people will rejoice to see the downfall of this man.

Let’s just stop a minute, because this doesn’t fit with how most people in our society live. Yes, we are happy to condemn car companies for fraudulently selling diesel cars as good for the environment, people who dodge taxes, those who sell drugs and politicians who don’t keep their promises. But on a personal level, more and more people have one simple rule. What is good for me? So they will take the easy way out. If they are found out, it is always someone else who is to blame. Never them. Judgement is what we pass on others.

All the Bible readings we have heard this morning are about judgement. Not the judgement of human beings but God. These readings are not exceptional, for the whole of the Old Testament and each of the books of the New Testament affirm a simple truth- In contrast to other world views, the Bible describe creation as a moral universe.

At first sight, this seems a complete nonsense. How can the world be ruled by a God who seeks to give life to all, but where the news headlines are of death and destruction.? I don’t have a five minute sound bite to answer that question. I don’t even have a five hour lecture to answer it. I am not so much concerned with the intellectual problem of evil, ,as with the reality of evil in the world and how we can deal with it.

The biblical response is to assert that God is on the throne, even though the world is in a mess. His justice is therefore at work in the present. This is clearly seen in our first reading, where Isaiah says, “You are my God I will exalt you, I will praise your name, for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure.” And the reason for his joy was that ruthless nations had been overthrown and the poor and the needy had been protected. God had saved his people. In other words the faith of the Jews was on a God who is not absent from the fallen world, but one who works repeatedly to protect and rescue his people. But there is a constant recognition that his chosen people bring evil upon themselves. This is vividly displaced in the parable that Jesus told. Here a king invites his people to a feast, and they presumably say they will come. But when the feast is ready, they ignore him . So the king sends out the servants again,. One group studious ignore the servants and get on with something else , whilst a second group murder the messengers. The response of the King is immediate and overwhelming. The city and its inhabitants are wiped off the map by the kings soldiers, before the soup gets cold. This is taken as a reference to destruction of Jerusalem, that took place about 40 years after the death of Christ, in AD70. The narrow nationalism of the Jewish rulers and the people, together with their inability to face reality led to their destruction.

“So, the parable is a warning to both its original hearers and also to Matthew’s readers that a response to God’s message is a crucial issue with eternal consequences.” (Matthew FV Filson p233) “Jesus never discarded the idea of a final judgement; to him forgiveness did not excuse subsequent moral laxity. Judas Iscariot reminds us that a man with every privilege may lack the wedding garment of obedient discipleship. Matthew stresses this judgement aspect more than the other evangelists, but they clearly include it, Jesus wanted both an initial enthusiastic response and ongoing faithful obedience. (Filson p234)

So we not only live in a moral universe, we live in a universe where we personally are morally accountable. “Our destiny hangs upon our response to God (Romans 8:13) and our dignity as human beings is undermined if we seek to evade the consequences of our actions.” ( Steve Motyer Judgment New Dictionary of Christian ethics p514)

In the past some preachers have abused their congregations with this reality. They have tried to shock their congregations by talking of the terrible consequences of not following Christ. That was not the way of Isaiah, or of Paul or of Jesus.

Just look at the picture of God we glimpse this morning in Isaiah prophecy. Those who follow God will find a refuge and a shelter in evil times and who wishes to give his people a feast of well aged wines and rich food filled with marrow. And he will destroy the shroud that is cast over this mountain, that is death. Lo, this is our God, we have waited for, let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

And Paul, Rejoice in the Lord always, The lord is near. Don’t worry about anything, pray. And the peace of God which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

And the parable of Jesus is about a feast, to which all are invited. It is not a wake, but a wedding feast in which Many are called, but few are chosen. At the Wednesday morning bible study, someone pointed out that this seems that God is not choosing everyone. No, it doesn’t mean that. Let me quote Professor Eduard Schweizer formally of the University of Basel. Mathew is trying to say that one can sit in the banquet hall without joining in the feast, because he is sitting there without his wedding clothes; in other words , he is not totally there in his heart. Called means taking up the initial invitation (vs 3-8), chosen means persevering to the end (24.222, 24:31). What is meant therefore is that anyone called by God must not look upon their call as something that is theirs by right; they must live it anew each day. When this call no longer shapes a life and makes it festive, it has vanished without trace. The statement is thus not really an interpretation of the parable in which an individual is not chosen, but a practical application. “ (Schweizer Matthew p421.)

Professors don’t spell out the application. So let me do so in a few words. To be called by God is to be invited to join a group of people where we will find life and love and acceptance. It is like a wedding party, but being sedate Anglicans, we call it a church. If we reject this invitation and choose to go our own way, then we will not find what will enrich us. As John Newton put it, solid joys and lasting treasure none but Zions children know.

So we are participants in a moral universe, where we have personal accountability. And let us not forget as those who will stand before God’s judgement seat, as Paul bids us, let us not judge our brother or sister ( Rom 14:4 I Cor 4:3-5)