Trinity 18 PC Exodus 32:1-14, Philippians 4:1-9, Matthew 22:1-14.

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

The party is ready, the guests have been sent for, but somehow, they have got distracted. Today’s Gospel reading and our Old Testament passage from Exodus fit together like a glove and give us a combined warning.

As we have listened to the passage from Exodus being read this morning, we can see the golden calf incident as the black and white blasphemy against God that it was…

But maybe we have to just put ourselves into the shoes of the people of Israel and ask the question which is key to this situation…who do the people think brought them out of Egypt?

The people say that it was Moses who brought them out of Egypt, he is their leader, but they are holding onto the human aspect, the person whose physical presence is with them rather than understanding the divine presence of God.

Now, Moses has vanished from their sight to go up the mountain to get instruction from God about the tabernacle. The people are seeing Moses as God rather than their leader. His absence creates a vacuum in which they grow impatient and become distracted, soon slipping back into their old ways of worshipping and making sacrifices to idols.

God’s reaction is an interesting one as he speaks to Moses instructing him to go down the mountain at once saying, **your**people, whom **you**broughtup out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely. He is scornfully agreeing with the people and he threatens his wrath upon them.

But Moses, the skilful mediator, turns this round on God saying… No, they are **your** people who **you** broughtout of Egypt, which is the fulfilment of promises made long ago; he calms the situation and Yahweh’s mercy prevails…

This is an important and defining moment in the relationship between Yahweh, Moses and Israel. Moses served as the channel of divine guidance and strength at a point in time when both qualities were needed. And to God he was a faithful servant and a patient voice insisting that justice is not justice unless it is done in love.

In our Gospel reading today Jesus uses the parable of the wedding banquet as a comparison to the kingdom of heaven. When all was ready the king sent out his slaves to gather the guests and bring them to the banquet but the guests… just like the people of Israel in Moses absence… seem to have been distracted and give their excuses as to why they cannot come. So, the king sends slaves out into the streets to bring anyone they can find, both the good and bad to the party. They came in droves and hall was full.

These people would have been the tax collectors the blind, the lame, the prostitutes, the poor. As the king mingles with his guests, he notices a man who is not wearing the appropriate clothing and has him thrown out.

In Jesus’ day, guests coming to a royal banquet were expected to wear festal garments.  For the wealthy, that meant embroidered robes and gowns adorned with precious jewels.  For the poor, it meant the best clothes you had, freshly washed.  If you could afford it, you’d wear white, and, if you couldn’t, you’d wear as close to white as possible. The man was seen as being disrespectful to the king and to be there to take his fill of the free food and drink.

In the Bible, clothes have a symbolic meaning.  They’re a sign of being dressed in the righteousness of God. In the case of this man it isn’t about the physical clothes the man is wearing, Jesus was using him as an example of the unwillingness to change. God wants us to ‘put on Christ’.

The good news is that God supplies all we need to fight the sinfulness of injustice and oppression, self-centeredness and greed. He gives them to us as a free gift through the death and resurrection of his only son Jesus Christ…

The catch is we have to be willing to wear them, not just on Sunday but throughout the week as we go about our daily lives too and that’s not always easy; it is easy to be distracted by the stresses and anxieties of our lives.

Life at the moment is full of anxiety as we watch the coronavirus infection rates rising again. Our Prime minister has already warned us of a bumpy road ahead and we await his announcement tomorrow.

Weddings planned this summer have not been able to enjoy a celebratory party on the scale of the one described in our gospel reading. We look ahead to Christmas with uncertainty not knowing quite how it will be this year. But it is to Paul’s letter to the Philippians that we must turn to help us deal with all of this.

Paul is writing this letter from prison as he is concerned about the people of Philippi’s ability to withstand their various pressures and not to be distracted whilst he cannot be presence among them.

He urges them to stand firm in the Lord. To work together with a common mind and in unity with each other by keeping on doing the things that they have learned and received and heard and seen in him. Paul has offered himself as an example to be imitated.

Paul encourages them using his own rejection of past values in favour of following the gospel of Jesus Christ and his single-minded focus on the kingdom of heaven.

He says, “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” …a reflection of his profound sense of confidence in God’s providence.

He assures the people that “The Lord is near”, that “the God of peace will be with you” and he gives them what we would recognise as a blessing “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”.

Steadfastness, unity, reliance on God rather than on our own anxiety are only possible for those who know that God will indeed be with them…and God will be with us, he will be at our side to strengthen and sustain us in the months ahead… **if** we keep our focus on Him and be in communion with him in prayer.

Paul voices joy to the people and urges them on in joy saying, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” …because for him joy comes as an entirely appropriate response to the good news of God’s action in and through Jesus Christ.

So, let us not become disheartened or be discouraged by whatever the next few months will bring, tough as they may be but be encouraged by those words of Paul to be steadfast in the Lord, know we are never alone because His presence is near, bring everything to him in prayer and hold onto that joy as we remember Paul’s words “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

Amen