

## Introduction

Well it's finally here. Christmas Day the day we have been anticipating for the last 4 weeks of Advent. To all of you in the FBC family as well as our friends who have been joining us on line I wish you a very blessed Christmas. The fact that I am speaking to all of you from here while all of you are at home huddled behind your computer's handphones or tablets gives you an idea how this Christmas is the most unusual in our living memory. Somehow it is not the same because we don't get to shake each other's hands or take in each other's greetings or smiles or even laugh together because that's what celebrations are all about isn't it? It's like Christmas without the oomph, the joy is muted. It is an unusual Christmas to say the least. Let me bring your attention to another Christmas under even more trying circumstances.

It was the Christmas of 1914 during World War 1 barely 4 months. The trenches were lined with soldier bristling with guns and bayonets trying their level best to kill each other. Some soldier began to sing Christmas carols and soon others joined in ..before long soldiers on opposing trenches started to sing Christmas carols to each other across the lines, and at certain points the Allied soldiers even heard brass bands joining the Germans in their joyous singing. Then on Christmas morning, the soldiers took a bold step, they climbed out of their trenches despite the obvious dangers and reached out their hands in peace and celebrated. There was a group that even played football together that day.

It too started like a muted Christmas they did not have the Christmas trees or the decorations or the turkey or the parties. All around them in the muddy trenches all they had was the smell of death and destruction all around them. But for a brief moment in time, all that didn't matter because they understood that Christmas was about the celebration of love and reconciliation. War was about hate and alienation. So just for that one tiny day on Christmas morning love won over hate. Reconciliation over Alienation

Needless to say, the very next day and for the next three years hatred and alienation resumed. While it was heartening to see how the spirit of Christmas had prevailed in 1914, I believe that they did not go far enough. Christmas is not about a single moment in time however magical it may seem. Christmas is about God inviting us to reconciliation not for a brief moment in time, what's the point of that?

Christmas is about God's invitation for us to a permanent, eternal restoration of relationships with each other and more importantly with Himself our Creator.

I don't think there is a better picture of God's invitation to us for celebration this Christmas than two passages which I will share from on this morning which are from Matthew 22 and Revelations 19

3:14

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### **A. God invites us to share in His joy**

(Alienation vs Reconciliation)

Let's first look at the Matt 22 parable...

*Matt 22: 1 And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, 2 "The kingdom of heaven may be*

*compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, 3 and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come.*

Why tell a parable about a wedding banquet?

Well back then, as in right now, one of the most joyful experiences that we can ever encounter is the marriage of a loved one. When two lives become one. A love story always resonates within us. We all appreciate a great love story. Teenagers immerse themselves in the hundreds of Mills and Boon novels, there are lots of RomComs on Netflix or we gossip about who is getting together with who in the office or in church. Deep down we are all so geared for relationships that they are even the stuff of legends. Remember the Greek legend of Helen of Troy who who was supposed to be the most beautiful woman in the world with a face that launched a thousand ships because when she was seduced by Prince Paris of Troy who took her to his city her husband King Menelaus launched a thousand ships besiege the city of Troy to reclaim his wife. Jesus uses the picture of a wedding banquet and the joy that comes from participating in it to remind us that the most important feature of our lives is our relationships. It is not things.

This pandemic and the restrictions have clearly shown that no matter how much money you have one tiny invisible virus makes it all virtually useless. You can't move, you cannot travel you cannot spend your money unless you want to order the entire catalogue from Lazada.

About 4 years ago the BBC published an article from the famous London School of Economics that interviewed over 200,000 people in the UK as well as abroad and they looked at the biggest cause of human misery. Guess what it was? Money or the lack of it? Jobs? . No....it was failed relationships and depression.

Having a loving relationship was the biggest single factor that impacted human happiness. The study found that just having a partner produced an impact of happiness 3 times higher than if a person had doubled his salary. Imagine what that means.. your wife or husband is worth 6 times your current salary in terms of happiness.

Now isn't that what the lock down response to the pandemic has shown? Mental disorders even suicides have increased when we are locked out of relationships. Psychologists and researchers have been saying this for many, many years—we have a deep innate need to be around other people and share experiences, and indeed our lives.

Yet the ironic thing about the pandemic is the counter intuitive rise in divorce. A leading British Law firm Stewarts reported a 122% rise in enquiries about divorce during the period of July to October this year compared to last year. There was a publication on the Malaysian Psychiatry Journal that documented that the Women's Aid Organisation and Talian Kasih reported an increment of 44% and 57% respectively in contact Mainly due to domestic abuse.

It would seem we can't live without each other but we also cannot live with each other.

This is because although we are hopelessly alienated we can only take each other in small doses. The Harvard Study for Adult development followed 268 men from 1938 from the Great Depression till today over 80 years and found that "close relationships, more than money or fame, are what keeps people happy throughout their lives, the study revealed. Those ties protect people from life's discontents, help to delay mental and physical decline, and are better predictors of long and happy lives than social class, IQ, or even genes"

One of the investigators Robert Waldinger said "Those who kept warm relationships got to live longer and happier. He added "Loneliness kills. It's as powerful as smoking or alcoholism."

While human relationships are designed to keep us living longer, healthier and more meaningful lives on a deeper level they point to a more permanent spiritual reality, that it is a relationship with God that will produce in us a joy that will sustain us into eternity.

In Revelations 19 towards the end of the bible our relationship with God is depicted as well like this parable as a wedding

*Revelations 19: 6 Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out,*

*“Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.*

*7 Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory,*

*for the marriage of the Lamb has come,*

*and his Bride has made herself ready;*

*8 it was granted her to clothe herself*

*with fine linen, bright and pure”—*

*for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints*

Jesus is the Lamb and we the people reconciled to God by the sacrifice of the Lamb are united with Him and the result of the union is so intense that the picture of a marriage and wedding is used to give us a tiny glimpse of what joy awaits us in the new heavens and new earth.

Can you imagine the anticipation and excitement that every bride and groom must feel before the wedding? Zephaniah gives us a glimpse

Zephaniah 3: 17 The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save;

he will rejoice over you with gladness;

he will quiet you by his love;

he will exult over you with loud singing.

This is not the barely concealed smile from a stiff upper lip well mannered English gentleman.

This is the language of unrestrained joy...loud boisterous celebration, like a loud Yam Seeng...at the wedding or a karaoke by none other than God

Christmas is God's invitation to the deepest experience of joy we will ever experience which brings us to my second point

6.06min

## **B. Many are called**

*Matt 22: 1 And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, 2 “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, 3 and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come.*

The parable tells us that the guests that were initially invited actually turned down the invitation. I am not sure if they were Chinese or not because for us Chinese a wedding invitation is sometimes perversely considered a summons as we have to bring an Ang pow of sorts to bless the couple and if we are invited to several weddings in a month it can take a huge toll on our wallets. But hey, this invitation comes from the King it is not an ordinary invitation. Imagine if when Prince Harry got married to Meghan a couple of years ago and you actually got a personal invitation like this would you turn it down? It would have been a tremendous honour, the last time a royal wedding occurred was when Prince Charles married Diana in 1981 that is 40 years ago. It is a once in a life time invitation.

An invitation by the King is an offer you cannot refuse simply because it come from royalty. It is a

great honour and privilege and it represents His personal hand extended to us. And yet these ungrateful people turned it down. And yet the king reissued a second invitation which is virtually unheard of, there is no king in the history that would have suffered the indignity of extending a second invitation because in real life the banquet goes on with or without you but this is a parable and the point is the grace and magnanimity of the king. See how these people reciprocated the king's grace ,they not only ignored the invitation, they reciprocated kindness and honour with treachery and insult by killing the herald of the invitation. The king is undeterred ..he widens the guest list dramatically

*Matthew 22: 8 Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 9 Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.' 10 And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests.*

The people are not invited based on merit or what they can bring to the table...Matthew writes that they were .."not worthy"  
They were gathered from every corner of the land and they were both "both bad and good."

*Phillip Yancey tells a story of his friend Tom whom he had not seen for 15 years*

*"Tom was a hard-drinking, lovable partygoer who stopped going to church soon after college. Last year his live-in girlfriend decided she wanted to attend church because of some crisis she was going through. Tom reluctantly agreed. That morning he sat down and started playing his guitar. Thinking of church, he resurrected three hymns from his distant memory. "Those are beautiful—what's the music?" his girlfriend asked. Tom explained the words to the hymns.*

*They chose a church out of the phone book, and to Tom's utter astonishment, that Sunday the congregation sang all three of those hymns. It so rattled Tom that he completely turned his life around. And now here he was, weeping, telling me how God had changed his life. Think of the "coincidence" of those three hymns being played the one Sunday that Tom dropped in to church. Most of us would have written Tom and his girlfriend off after all they were living in sin and didn't deserve to be invited to God's banquet but the grace of God extends to many who are forgotten all over.*

*In 1959 the famous evangelist Billy Graham was in Melbourne preaching in a crusade. There were huge crowds as usual in the Melbourne Cricket grounds. While he was preaching he did not realise that all around him were 10 young gangsters who each had a home made zip gun underneath their coats waiting to kill him when their leader George Palmer gave the signal. Now the reason why George wanted to kill Billy was because he lost his father at a very young age of 7 1/2 years a decade earlier. He collapsed after planting 100 cherry trees and George blamed God shaking his young fists at God " why did he have to take his father from him" Hatred is like a cancer it does not stay still it grows and it grew in George' young heart and exploded in to violence as he joined a gang where his temper could fully express itself. He was involved in gang fights and in one of them they captured a rival gang leader and they drove a car over his hand over and over again crushing every bone. On the 15 of March 1959 George and his gang were poised to commit murder because George hated God As he looked behind at the crowd he wondered by all these people were here and when he looked to the front again suddenly he heard a voice " what are you doing here?" He quickly*

turned around to see who had spoken to him but nobody he knew  
He then realised it was the voice of God" I know this is you God but you took my dad , you hurt me so much, why should I love you why should I care about you? God said " George I didn't take your dad to hurt you ..I would never hurt you full stop" The gospel message streamed down on the crowd, then came the appeal and George broke down and cried...and cried , he had not cried since his dad died. His zip gun was under his jumper. He took it out and put it down and ran to the front. The amazing thing about that was not only George but 9 out of his gang of 10 would be assassins were converted that night.

Each one of these people was invited by God. In George Palmer God brought an evangelist Billy Graham all the way to Melbourne but for Tom, God used the believers in his old church to teach him the hymns and the church which he and his girlfriend had randomly picked from the phone book

When George Palmer returned back to the church he attended as a child and old man was there who greeted and hugged him and it turned out that this elderly saint had been praying for him for years.

In that first Christmas 2000 years ago God sent His invitation us not through just any servant. He personally sent His only begotten Son to an alienated world seething with anger and pain. God is challenging us today just like in 1914 more than 100 years ago even under the most difficult of circumstances to get up out of our trenches and reach out like His Son. Pick up a phone. Dial in a Zoom...a long lost friend, an office mate, a relative. Christmas is God's invitation to every one ...but today He has graciously decided to use everyone of us to issue that invitation to eternal life everyone

## 6.16

### C. Few are chosen

*Matthew 22: 13 But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. 12 And he said to him, Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. 13 Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' 14 For many are called, but few are chosen."*

I remember this story of the youngest Dato ever to receive the title from the King some time ago. There is some confusion over his name and age on social media. Some say it is Alvin Gor others report it as Alvin Lim, some reports put him as young as 19 years old which then begs the question how could a 19 year old earn a title like this. Be that as it may he got in to the ceremony and received his title because he was wearing the white Dato's uniform which the palace itself provided for him.

The netizens noted his Richard Mille watch worth 1.3 million ringgit on his left wrist. Imagine if he decided to front up to the ceremony with the watch and a tuxedo instead of the Dato's uniform , I wonder what would the King do in that case?

The point of the parable is that we need to come on God's terms not our own. Each of us has been alienated from God by our individual decisions to live life independent of Him. The bible calls this sin and sinful men and women cannot come into the presence of God if we are not rightly related to Him which the bible calls as being unrighteousness hence we are unworthy.

Imagine a husband has upset his wife...perhaps lashed out in anger and their relationship has been put on hold. They don't communicate any more ..there is the dreaded silent treatment. To make it right he buys her a huge diamond ring...and soon all is forgiven ? I don't think so....most wives will not be susceptible to bribes because alienation is all about relationships. The only way for there to be reconciliation is when he comes to her on her terms not his own terms.

The man in this parable came based on his own merits. He thought he was good enough There are many people in the world that think that if I am sincere or really honest I too can come to God on my own after all isn't He a God of love?

To come to God armed with anything than what is provided by God Himself is presumptuous and insults God. It is not the sincerity with which one has when one approaches God that is important it is the rejection of what God has provided.

This man is bound hand and foot and cast out into darkness. This is the picture of judgement and hell which Jesus is conveying through this parable.

At Christmas God provides His only Son...to die on a cross 33 years later as the offering for our sin. What this man did and what many of us do is say " That is not enough , it's no big deal, I can do better. I am an honourable man and honest man, I have worked very hard to provide for the poor. I am good enough but the Son of God is not.

The consequences of not reconciling with God is not just the silent treatment from God it is eternal silence from Him....darkness is the complete absence of the light and beauty of love of God and just pure misery because Jesus says where the man will be there will only be weeping....and gnashing of teeth....regret, anguish, sorrow ,pain and loss forever and ever.

This Christmas, God is inviting us to share in His eternal joy, His wedding banquet and He has provided the wedding garments..described in Revelations

*Revelations 7: 14b They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*

The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, the blood of the eternal Lamb of God is the only thing that will make us pure as the driven snow and allow us to stand in the presence of God in the light of His unshielded glory one day and participate in an eternity of joy and celebration and reconciliation

The parable ends with the verse Matt 22: 14 *For many are called, but few are chosen."*

Will you be those few who are chosen....all you have to do is to reach out and confess your sins turn to Jesus and take Him as your Lord and Saviour.

It took George Palmer 10 years of rage and pain before he finally realised he needed to be reconciled with God you do not need to wait that long. This Christmas God is inviting you to the banquet with His robes with your sins washed away with the precious blood of His Son. Will you come?

5.00

## Notes

*I can think of the testimony of Lowell Ivy confined indefinitely in maximum security prison for drug trafficking , robbery, belonging to a white supremacy gang and while in a super max prison attempted assault with deadly weapon. One day even though he was locked away in solitary confinement a radio program “ Here comes the Light “ penetrates the thickest wall of the super max prison and he hears God’s invitation ,the gospel and for the first time when he is at the end of his rope he lets God in. The first thing God dealt with him was the issue of racism. He knew he was going to hell . He fell on his knees and begged God to change his heart. He spent the next 10 years in solitary confinement but spent it studying God’s word. The only group in prison not racially segregated were the Christians ...many are called*

*<https://www.ligonier.org/stories-of-gods-grace/>*