

Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia
by the Reverend Alan Neale on Sunday October 12th 2008

“Shoulder Shrugging”

Matthew 22, verse 5: “But they made light of it and went their way” or as the Message translation reads: “They shrugged their shoulders and went off”.

I read recently “Trumpton Hall” by Miranda Seymour, a beautifully written but painful true story of a man’s love for a country home in England... a love which put his family in second place. But in the book, as I suppose in any tragic situation, there are moments of delightful humour.

“Mr. Douglas, the rector, spoke mildly to the parishioners of God’s message. Lucy, his wife, who needed no advice from God, took out her gold repeater watch and stared at it. At midday precisely, even when her husband was in mid-sentence, she thumped the tiled floor with her ebony cane. The congregation rose for the last hymn; the rector, putting away his notes, crept back down the pulpit steps”. Lucy “needed no advice from God” – indeed she “made light of it”. By the way, I read that story to my beloved wife... her response, “Perhaps I’ll try that!”. And mine, “Yes, but only at noon”!

George Fitzroy Seymour loved to write letters and expected immediate replies. He became frustrated, rather like the king in today’s Gospel parable, when no-one replied. Once “he addressed himself to God as ‘no-one ever seems to write to you’. But even God was not to be trusted (and so) George ordered him to write his answer clearly (underlined) and promptly (underlined): ‘Please have it here by tomorrow’”. To poor George, everyone seemed to “make light” of his epistolary efforts.

“But they made light of it and went their way”, “they shrugged their shoulders and went off”.

The king had prepared the most sumptuous, elegant, noteworthy, prestigious wedding banquet. He wished to share not only the riches of his wealth but the riches of his happiness at the marriage of his son. Invitations had been sent out in advance, what probably we would call “save the date” cards, and now his servants were charged to give personal invitations to the honoured guests. “But they made light of it and went their way”.

Wedding invitations today, and I have seen many of them, wedding invitations today make it exceedingly easy, effortless, for the guest to reply... a beautifully prepared response card alongside an elegant envelope which is already addressed and stamped, all ready for postage. And yet, as I hear often, people are shocked by the rude and careless indifference of honoured invited guests.

Well, the king understood this feeling and so sends out another round of servants this time with the announcement, “Look, everything is on the table, the prime rib is ready for carving. Come to the feast!” (well, that’s how the Message translation reads!).

As the parable continues so it becomes rather gory... the king’s son is assassinated, the guests are all murdered and their city razed to the ground and one poor hapless guest (without a wedding robe) is dispatched into “outer darkness”. But then, you see, that one hapless guest was also guilty of “making light of it” – though honoured with the invitation, he chose to forgo the proffered wedding gown!

All of this... because “they made light of it and went their way”. This surely is one of the keys to understanding this parable... if we, if I, do not give proper significance to invitations and opportunities then suffering and chaos (and regret) will abound!

The people of Israel are invited by God to share with Him a unique covenant relationship but... do not make other gods and worship them. But “they make light of it and go their way” and so God alerts Moses, “Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; though of you I will make a great nation”. But Moses pleads with God and, we read, “The Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring

on his people". You see... though the people made light of God's invitation, the Lord did not make light of Moses' heartfelt prayer!

And St. Paul charges the Christians at Philippi not to "make light" of so many things (all deserving a sermon each)... are you ready?

"Do not make light" of the labours of others... verse 4.

"Do not make light" of the power of the gentle word, the gentle act.... Verse 5.

"Do not make light" of prayer... verse 6.

And "do not make light" of the impact of spending time with "whatever is true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing and commendable" and, contrariwise, "don't make light" of entertaining negative thoughts and words, of carping and destructive gossip... verses 8 and 9!

Do not make light of these things... otherwise we face, inevitably, loss, pain and regret.

Recently I explained to some parishioners that members of 12 Step Programs will generally always answer positively and readily to any request. This met with puzzled looks and questions as to why this was not the case in church life. "Well," I explained, "those in 12 Step Programs have a clear sense of that from which they have been rescued, they do not make light of this salvation, and so gratitude and readiness to serve abounds". Perhaps in church life too many have forgotten, have made light of all from which they have been rescued. Psalm 106:21 "for they forget God their Saviour and the great deeds he did for them in Egypt".

I believe it is the mark of a growing spirituality that we do not make light of the divine opportunities and invitations presented to us daily rather we recognize and treasure them for what they are... doorways into newness of life!

Yes, we have other things to do, we have plans (you remember the Hebrew adage, "If you want to make God laugh, make plans") – we have our schedule before us so, rather like the recalcitrant guests, we feel a strong desire to return to the farm, to the business.

And sometimes we are so threatened by the invitation, the charge, to new life that we even fight back and destroy that which seems to challenge us the most!

Friends, we are not called to become dour, sanctimonious, solemn, grim unsmiling but we are called to live, in the power of the Spirit, in such a way that we have ready hearts and minds and wills to respond to the divine invitation whenever it comes and by whatever means it comes!

There are legions of people around this glorious country exhorting people not to "make light" of the precious opportunity that will be presented to them on November 4th... to engage in the democratic process and cast their vote in the presidential election. This is all right and proper.

But we should all the more be excited and energized to exhort people not to "make light" of the precious opportunity offered to all... to begin a new life with the God who loves them dearly, even to the point of self-sacrifice on a Cross.

This morning's motet (from the Song of Solomon) reads (sings!) thus, "I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. He brought me into the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love"... and all this made possible because... he did not "make light" of the Lord's invitation.

Please God, neither may we! Amen.