

## Introduction

Message

Advent 1

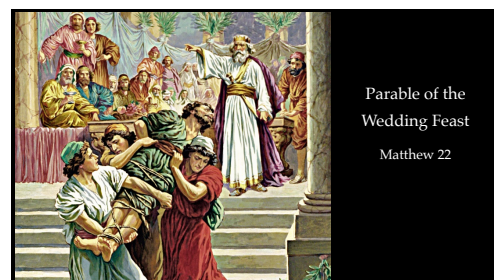
Holiness Check

The Church has long recognized the wisdom of seasons to ensure we do things well. Advent is a four-week period of preparation for the coming of Christ in Christmas and, let's not forget, the awaited second coming. It's like the six weeks of Lent before Good Friday and Easter.

People who turn up at church to celebrate Christmas or Easter without any preparation are like people who turn up at their own wedding without a courtship or having prepared – imagine, no lead up!

Jesus told a haunting story about this sort of thing in the Parable of the Wedding Feast in Matthew 22. It's a story about God's welcoming generous hospitality in inviting people to join in his celebration of the Wedding of his Son. The invited guests don't want to come so others are invited instead -the good and the bad alike- to fill the wedding hall and enjoy the party. Then we read from verse 11:

<sup>11</sup>“But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. <sup>12</sup>And he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. <sup>13</sup>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.’<sup>14</sup>For many are called, but few are chosen.”



Parable of the  
Wedding Feast  
Matthew 22

That is disturbing – “many are called but few are chosen.” The wrongly dressed guest was unprepared and insolent with it. He had come to the wedding feast for his own reasons but without making any effort to honour the spirit of the occasion or the grace and generosity of the host. Unless God's grace is received in a fitting way with due preparation it may become an occasion for judgment.

St Paul brought a similar warning to the Corinthians in relation to what we would call Holy Communion, even though it was celebrated very differently then. In 1 Corinthians 11, from v.27 we read:



<sup>27</sup>Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. <sup>28</sup>Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. <sup>29</sup>For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. <sup>30</sup>That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. <sup>31</sup>But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. <sup>32</sup>But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

When God gives something precious it is important that we receive it in a worthy manner. Failure to do so may bring judgment and worse. The advice is: Let a person in what they do.

That is my message today and what to bear in mind during a season of preparation.

This is why we prepare at the beginning of a service.

We do not relate to the holy things of God as if any response or mode of engagement will do. We examine ourselves first.

To bring some teaching on this I would like to consider that term ‘Holy’

- God is Holy
- God blesses us with holy things.
- God calls us to be holy.
  - This is why I sometimes greet you as ‘saints’ which is what we are called be, the holy ones.

So let’s check up: If Christ were to return today, would you be ready to meet him? Are you holy now?

Following Paul’s advice is to examine ourselves.”

Can we see our own sin and our own unholiness?

Can we recognize what needs cleansing and changing in readiness to meet Christ?

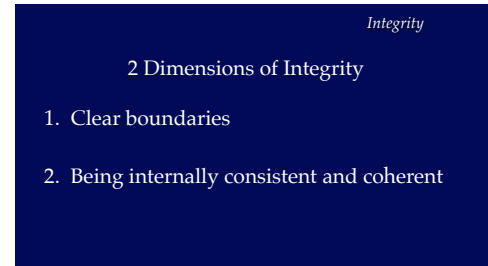
That is what I want to speak into today:

## Development

Let’s look at holiness as oneness or ‘integrity’.

In saying ‘God is one’ we are making two claims about the personal integrity of God that need to apply to us too.

These two dimensions are:



1. That of being bounded or clearly different from what one is not – think of being whole in oneself.
  - a. Yahweh says I am who I am and I will be whom I will be. I will not be manipulated, influenced nor pressured beyond what I choose in myself.
  - b. In that integrated holiness God is complete and distinct from everything else. There is no blurring of being between God and creation. God and creation or the world do not mix.
2. That of being internally consistent or coherent within one self.
  - a. God is flawlessly consistent and without inner contradiction – perfect light without any darkness.
  - b. The Trinity is one in perfect unity.
  - c. God is truly whole.

These aspects of holiness as integrity are different from Polytheistic beliefs where the gods are divided and conflicted or sometimes perceived as impersonal contrary forces such as Ying and Yang.

It is also different from Islam where Allah can be anything at any time without expectation of consistency or coherency hence all you can do is surrender in the moment to the inscrutable.

Let's ask:

**Q:** What does the Holy God say to us his redeemed people?

**A:** "You shall be holy, for I am holy." from 1 Peter 1:16 but see also three times in Leviticus.<sup>1</sup>

So if we look at holiness as integrity the issues in a season of preparation become:

**Q1.** Are we maintaining purity in our lives or are we infected with sin the way our bodies catch a virus or get infected by bacteria?

a. That is an easy question. Our sin may be secret to others but we know it's sin – right?

**Q2.** Are we consistent and coherent in our commitment to God in Christ?

b. That is typically the more slippery issue and ripe for self-deception so I am going to speak about that. – Are we consistent Christians?

### Integrity of Coherence:

Back in Matthew 22 Jesus was asked; "Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

That was an integrity question. As there were about 600 laws, rules and regulations the question of how this all hung together with coherence and consistency was a live one. People struggled to see the wood for the trees here. Jesus' reply will be familiar from our first Sunday's liturgy:

*Matthew 22:37-40*

<sup>37</sup>... "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. <sup>38</sup>This is the great and first commandment. <sup>39</sup>And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. <sup>40</sup>On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

<sup>37</sup>And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. <sup>38</sup>This is the great and first commandment. <sup>39</sup>And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. <sup>40</sup>On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

Jesus gave them structure and priority but showing the coherence and consistency. He showed them how it all related and held together. Holiness sits on love of God and love of neighbour. Hold these two things together and you will be realizing the whole of God's Law – you will be holy as God seeks from his people as being Godly integrity.

### **Application**

*OK Nice theory Francis but what about us here today in all our cultural and human complexity?*

<sup>1</sup> **Leviticus 11:44-45** <sup>44</sup>For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls on the ground. <sup>45</sup>For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy."

**Leviticus 19:2** <sup>2</sup>"Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.

**Leviticus 20:7** <sup>7</sup>Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am the LORD your God.

**1 Peter 1:16** <sup>16</sup>since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

One of the blessings of pastoring a church with so many nationalities is that I see Christianity lived in different ways. *Don't ever think you are all the same!*

So I have had to think about the components of Christian faith that matter for all everywhere.

- 1) The Gospel and the Faith
- 2) Prayer
- 3) Right Relationships and Loving Behaviour
- 4) Mission

Here they come in order:

- 1) The Gospel and the Faith
  - a. Doctrine and what we believe, trust and hope for.
  - b. This is the content of our faith resting on the Bible.
- 2) Prayer
  - a. Deep calling to deep, hearts poured out in worship, loving God in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit - our personal communion with God in Christ.
- 3) Right Relationships, Loving Behaviour and Ethics
  - a. Both individually but especially corporately in the fellowship of the church.
  - b. Loving and serving our brothers and sisters as Christ loves us worked out in community – here and around.
  - c. Making right choices.
- 4) Mission
  - a. Living as a witness and ambassador for Christ.

What I notice is that individual people -like churches and denominations- pick and mix from all that. Some dimensions are preferred to others. Some dimensions are neglected. That is to be expected but even then it is to be watched because anything less than wholeness is less than holy.

- Some churches are all about teaching the faith which is good but can't get round to prayer.
- Some are all about prayer and worship but the teaching is all encouragement -without meat or doctrine.
- Some are big on right living with codified instructions but love does not flow.
- Some are big on mission and are out there doing good stuff but pass on prayer and doctrine.
- Very few churches really get mission in balance including us. Church is then entirely for the members and not those outside.

So that's about a lack of wholeness and integrity of Up, In and Out.

Picking one thing to focus on and neglecting the rest is not full Christianity and less than holy and risks hypocrisy.

So this Advent:

- If you have been neglecting prayer then its time to address that. Make time to pick up what is currently being overlooked.
- If you have been neglecting study of the faith by not reading the Bible or receiving teaching then you need to address that. Make time in Advent.

- There is lots of sermon material on our church website including a series entitled ‘Grasping the Gospel’ not to mention next week we will have RightNow Media available with so much to click on and digest.
- If you can’t remember the last time you went out of your way to serve another then guess what? - service is your lack. Do something in the spirit of Christ for another.
- If you do not spend time-sharing life with others and experiencing Christian fellowship then that needs fixing.
- If you live outside the church as a secret agent then its time to fly the flag in witness.
  - If your whole Christian life is lived within the church then that needs looking at.

This last one applies to me.

I would like to spend more time in prayer and being with people, especially non-Christians and away from a desk.

If we consider holiness as consistency and coherence and look at the 4 dimensions listed, are we consistent?

Inconsistency is what Jesus often addressed as hypocrisy.

It is very possible to be unholy and lacking integrity through being inconsistent.

I suspect that it may be the basis for serious sin among Christians what we hear about in the media. The world sees Christians who pray and preach yet are horrible people in their unrighteous behavior and lack of love. How can Christians who pray and preach fail in their behavior so badly?

Holiness calls for integrity across Faith, Prayer, Relationships, Behaviour and Mission.

Now let’s remember Jesus’s words that provide the key:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. <sup>38</sup>This is the great and first commandment. <sup>39</sup>And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

St John comes back to this when he says: in 1 John 4.20.

<sup>20</sup>If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.

1 John 4.20

<sup>20</sup>If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.

I have been in church long enough to know that this teaching from Jesus and then John hits a nail and exposes the unholy crack for many people, a place where we don’t always hold it together.

The challenge we may face is that those we come close to, our brothers and sisters, sometimes hurt us. When people come together there are incidents and accidents that hurt which lead to hints and allegations. This was happening among Jesus’ first disciples who included some brash and less than sensitive personalities.

We may be strong in knowing the faith, strong in prayer and yet we experience pain in relationships with other people that makes it all difficult and can damage the fellowship.

Jesus experienced this and on the cross he modeled how to respond: “Father forgive.”

In case we miss that he spelled it out by teach us to pray: (Matthew 6.12-13 & 14-15)

... forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

.... ....

<sup>14</sup>For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, <sup>15</sup>but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

The disciples were not so sure about this so Peter asked Jesus in Matthew 18.21-23.

<sup>21</sup>... “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” <sup>22</sup>Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

From where I stand this is where we are struggling as a church. This is where we tend to lack integrity of holiness. Instead of applying the teaching of Jesus to love God and neighbour and recognize that love of God must include love of the brother and sister, excuses are made, other rules are applied, prosecution cases are built, judgment is applied, hearts are hardened and Jesus weeps.

Jesus would call this proclaiming but not living the love of God -‘hypocrisy’.

We may be sound in doctrine, active in prayer and even in mission but if we do not love those alongside us in the family of faith, even when it hurts doing all we can to preserve the fellowship, there is something very wrong.

This is what Jesus died for. “Father may they be one so that the world may know that you and I are one.”  
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Jesus knew about this, he was hurting in every possible way when he said “Father forgive.”

He was suffering real injustice. He was abandoned by his friends. He was full of pain and yet he did not lash out or cut people off from himself.

Forgiveness of hurt is not easy.

It begins with a decision to let go and stop hating the other in our heart.

It's a moving away from record keeping and remembering in bitterness. Meanwhile the pain is real even if the facts of the relationship might not be. It's about moving towards looking at the other in hopeful generosity and allowing God's love to change us even when we would rather be angry.

It is not primarily about forgetting.

Neither is it about extracting the level of apology we think is required. Someone saying ‘sorry’ can help but in my experience I would not wait for it! Don't set a sentence and expect a penalty price.

That is not how God has loved us in Christ taking our sin upon himself.

God's love for us is not premised on an apology.

The Gospel is that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.<sup>3</sup> God's love is not contingent on the right words being said or the correct paper work being submitted in advance!

What Christ modeled on the cross and afterwards with his disciples is the pattern for us when our close Christian relationships hurt. “Father Forgive and I forgive”

If what I have spoken speaks to you, please take it to prayer and allow the Holy Spirit to guide you.

This is the work of Advent so we may be true and prepared for Christ's coming, in Spirit and Truth.

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<sup>2</sup> Ref. John 17.

<sup>3</sup> Romans 5.8