**Sermon preached by Penny Flynn on 11th October 2026**

**Readings:** *Exodus 32: 1-14; Matthew 22:1-14; Philippians 4:1-9*

**Trinity 19**

The book of 'Exodus is essentially a book about knowing God through personal experience' *[New Bible Commentary (NBC) p92]*. As well as recording the exit of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, the leadership of Moses, the amazing signs and wonders of God, 'it contains some of the deepest and most mysterious insights into the nature of God, and the relationship between God and his people' *[the Bible Book p50].* That relationship continued to be slowly cultivated, but it went very suddenly downhill when the people lost sight of it and demanded that Aaron should make a god for them who should go before them. It seemed too long to wait for Moses to reappear from the mountain where he was communing with God. Patience grew thin, and something tangible was deemed necessary by the waiting people 'to represent God's presence in their midst.' *[NBC p116b]*. We realise that the Israelites were not actually trying to replace the Lord but, both through the calf statue and their feasting, to be able to see, tangibly, the god who had delivered them from Egypt, and to celebrate the Lord and their covenant. 'Although the Israelites did not consciously reject 'the Lord' as their God, their attempt to portray him as a golden calf was a major breach of the covenant stipulations which they had earlier accepted.' *[NBC p116b]*. Earlier, but very recently. Perhaps they hadn't had time to absorb all those stipulations …

Listen again to God's reaction to the calf: God to Moses – "Go down at once! **Your** people, whom **you** brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely …" Moses to God – "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against **your** people, whom **you** brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?" My emphasis, clearly, but both God and Moses say the people are 'yours' and 'you' did the bringing out …

God to Moses: 'I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone ...' God was furious. Yet Moses talked God round. 'Turn from your fierce wrath' – and God changed His mind. God had mercy. God valued God's chosen, rescued people.

Of course, the covenant relationship continued to develop between God and the people. All who have lived since have had the 10 commandments. Yet even today, how many idols are made and worshipped in various ways? Rhetorical question. Is it that, in order to make sense of God, humans try, even unconsciously, to domesticate God? And it's tempting always for ourselves to point the finger at others, when we need seriously to examine our own lives and behaviours.

Jump on thousands of years to the Gospels, which also are about knowing God through personal experience, specifically through knowing God's Son, Jesus. We heard the third in a run of 3 parables Jesus told on the same theme; 3 times he illustrated this particular lesson with a story. Here Jesus told of a wedding feast that nearly wasn't. It's a parable; told to teach something significant. But what? And what do we learn of God through it? Was God's favour beginning to be spread wider, more broadly than it had been? Had the covenant people forfeited their special relationship with God? This is a parable with several parts. The wedding banquet was ready and the invited guests summoned. Why did they refuse to come, make excuses and even mistreat to the point of killing the 2nd lot of messengers? Not surprisingly the king in this story was furious and there was further terror. All very extreme, and an uncomfortable story to hear Jesus telling. This must indicate the seriousness of his message. The symbolism is clear enough – Israel's refusal (in its leaders) to respond to God's call through Jesus would lead to the destruction of *their* city, Jerusalem, to which Jesus had come in order to be rejected and killed (16:21). The chapter records words of Jesus which begin, 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! … You (also) on the outside look righteous to others but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.' (23:28)

The king tries – first in the usual way, sending the slaves to call those who'd been invited; then sending a 2nd lot of slaves with almost a plea, "Look, I have prepared my dinner …' That plea was

rejected, with mistreatment and murder; the king responded by sending his troops - who murdered and destroyed; more slaves were sent out to gather anyone and everyone until the hall was full. Yes, despite all the violence and rejection, the wedding feast still awaited, a wider invitation was issued – well more of an order really. 'The slaves go out into the streets and gather' – well, can *you* imagine being gathered from the street along with all and sundry just like that? But the wedding hall was finally filled with guests. All good.

But no – the king came to see the guests – 'who have we here then?' – and finds one not wearing a wedding robe. The poor guy was speechless when challenged – bound hand and foot and thrown into outer darkness. The kingdom of heaven is open to anyone – but it also makes demands. It is a privilege which is to be taken seriously. Seriously – for everyone – for the original invitees and for the newcomers.

'Many are called, but few are chosen.' Jesus ended his lesson.

Even among the new people there is no automatic guarantee of salvation. Remember those gathered were both good and bad. Gathered in haste, one might say. The slaves rapidly obeyed the order, but were not tasked with interviewing and assessing as fit for inclusion. Failing to put on the clean white clothes was an insult to the host. Yes – it's still a story, a parable, not real … and yet very powerful in its message. And the leaders knew exactly at whom the lesson was aimed.

What kind of God do we worship?

- A god who is convenient? who we can make to fit around how we want to live our lives? Who we can respond to positively when it suits us, but say no to without consequence when it doesn't? for whom we are not prepared to wait? Where is the faith in those?
- A god who we can turn to when it suits us? When we're in need, but not when all's going well?
- A god who accepts all and every person without question, without demands? Many would like to think so – it would save having to think too much about how one behaves, how one lives; it would save worrying about total commitment.
- Or do we worship God of the Bible? Almighty, omnipresent, ever-loving and gracious? Calling and welcoming all who come with respect, with awe, with commitment – all who take God seriously, who change their ways and honour God with the way they live?

The people of whom we've heard today in their Old Testament wanderings were God's chosen; they had a covenant with God: He would be their God and they would be God's people. They knew God's wrath, but they also knew God's guiding faithfulness and care. But they *had* to live up to God's name; they *had* to live as God decreed.

The people of whom we've heard today in their New Testament life as an occupied nation were still God's people of that Covenant; but their leaders had become too rigid and domineering in their interpretation and application of God's law, which they imposed strictly. Jesus came to bring freedom and fulfilment of that law; to show them God more clearly; to show them God through the personal experience of knowing Jesus. Jesus, also, showed God's wrath – despair at the people who would not listen, would not change their ways, would not recognise and acknowledge Him.

Let us ensure God is at the centre of our lives, is the focus of our lives and our life together as we recall the sacrifice of His Son, our Saviour, Jesus.

Life with God is to be taken seriously, but it is also spectacularly joyful. Let us pray that God will keep us faithful and sure, not misled or tempted to stray. Let us rejoice in the Lord always, knowing God is near; in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving making our requests known to God. Amen.

*Penny Flynn*
11th October 2026