

THE PARABLE OF THE WEDDING BANQUET

Isaiah 25. 1 – 9

Philippians 4. 1-9

Matthew 22. 1 – 14

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Everyone loves a wedding, don't they? I think that of all the religious, social and cultural events that people can attend, a wedding is one of the happiest and the most joyful. When I think about weddings, I cannot help but remember the Royal Wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton which occurred six years ago. What a magnificent wedding ceremony they had! It was watched by nearly 2 billion people across the world, if you include streams of wedding coverage that were released on the Internet. That's a lot of people.

But when we look at the figures closely, the people who actually received one of those beautiful invitations to the Royal Wedding were far fewer than 2 billion. Approximately 1,900 people were invited to the wedding ceremony at Westminster Abbey; and of that number, a select 600 people were invited to the lunchtime reception at Buckingham Palace given by The Queen. And then that evening, only a mere 300 people were invited to the formal wedding dinner and dance given by The Prince of Wales. Some people would consider those who were invited to *that* dinner as members of the truly exclusive set, or members of the 'happy few'.

Our gospel text in Matthew 22 gives us yet another example of a royal wedding and of a royal wedding banquet. But unlike the Royal Wedding of Prince

William and Kate Middleton, no-one accepts the invitation that has been offered to them. No-one shows up. Seeing the situation, the king very kindly sends out his servants again and asks that they tell the guests that the wedding banquet is now ready. It was customary in the Ancient Near East to give two invitations: an original invitation¹ before the meal and then a second invitation, which was an announcement concerning the exact time of the meal.² Once the guests arrived at this meal, they would stay for a period of several days, because in this case the wedding feast continued for that length of time.

In spite of the king's reiterated invitation, those who were invited to the wedding banquet still refused to come. Some had other things to do; some went off to work; and still others actually went so far as to kill the king's servants, which then incurred his wrath and led him to kill them and destroy the city where they lived.³

And in what is now a third invitation, the king extends his banquet invitation to many other people, people who weren't included in his initial guest list. His invitation strategy is exactly the opposite of The Queen's: the servants are instructed to invite 'everyone', 'all whom they found, both good and bad'. And many people do indeed come. The wedding hall is filled with guests.

¹ In Matthew 22, there is an interplay between the concepts of being 'called' (the Greek *kaleo*, which in many translations is rendered as 'invited') and the concept of being 'chosen' or 'elected' (the Greek *elekto* as in verse 14). In verse 3, the servants are told to go out and invite those who were called/invited. But in the end most of those initial invitees declined, revealing that although called, they had not been elected or chosen. We must be cautious: St Matthew's use of the concept of election is not the same as St Paul's later use of it. For Paul, election is the *source* of a person's salvation. For Matthew, election is the *goal* or end-result of truly responding to God's call with a joyful life of gratitude.

² Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through peasant eyes* (Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 88 – 113.

³ This statement is generally taken to be a description of what happened to Jerusalem in 70 C.E.

In this parable (which is the third in a set of three),⁴ our Lord is speaking on an initial level about how God had extended his invitation of grace to his covenant people, to the Jews and the Jewish leaders of Jesus's generation, many of whom rejected that invitation. This led God to then extend his invitation of grace to the Gentiles, or the non-Jews, who finally accepted this invitation and received its benefits.

The choice of a wedding banquet motif in the parable is very fitting, because the king in the parable is indeed God the Father, who invites all of humankind to the wedding feast of his Son, whose bride is the Church. Seen in this way, the wedding feast is a direct allusion to the Messianic banquet described elsewhere in the Scriptures, the feast that will occur when all members of the Christian Church are reunited with Christ.⁵

If you, I and everyone else have been invited to this wedding banquet, and if we have indeed been invited in such a wonderful way to become the bride herself, it is understandable that God the Father would be hurt if we refused his invitation. What is at stake is the free invitation to sit at the King's table of grace. What is at stake is of infinite, precious value.

We now come back to part two of our parable, which is given in verses 11 – 14 and which raises the issue of wedding clothes. In a sense, it is the oddest and most startling part of the story. Up until verse 11, there is no prior mention of any wedding garments at all. And now the king discovers that someone is not

⁴ The three parables are found in the context of Jesus's cleansing of the Temple (21. 12 – 17) and cursing the fig tree (21. 18 – 22), both of which are signs of God's rejection of the Jewish leadership, rabbinical Judaism, or the nation. The first parable speaks of the rejection of God's messenger, i.e. John the Baptist; the second parable speaks of the rejection of God's Son, the Messiah; and the third parable (the focus of this sermon) speaks of the rejection of God's grace.

⁵ Cf. Matt 8. 11; Lk 13. 29; 14. 15; 22. 16; Rev 19. 9, 17, 19.

wearing wedding clothes and has the speechless guest thrown out, bound hand and foot, into the darkness.

St Augustine, using some limited historical evidence, and others have written that in the Ancient Near East, the host provided for necessary garments to wear at a feast. This would mean that the man in verse 11 refused them or entered the wedding feast in an inappropriate way. The inappropriately-dressed man seems to recognise his error by his lack of response in verse 12. And he is therefore punished.

The second part of the Parable of the Wedding Banquet teaches us something about human responsibility after receiving the grace of God. We have already seen that the only way to get into the banquet is to accept the wonderful and abundant grace of God; to accept our Lord and all his benefits as the way to salvation. We are not admitted to the wedding banquet through any merit of our own.⁶

Salvation begins with the grace of God, but as we accept his invitation, we are to accept it rightly. To be a Christian is not only to accept the invitation to come to the feast, but also to use the opportunity to be a new person in Christ. To be a Christian is not only to be forgiven, but to be renewed. To be a Christian involves a complete change, from the inside out: heart, soul, mind and strength, all that we are and all that we have. It means a complete reorientation, away from self and towards God.

⁶ Cf. Eph 2. 8 – 9.

To be a Christian means to put off the old nature and to put on the new nature. It means setting aside self-righteousness and living in God's righteousness. As St Paul wrote to the Christians in Galatia, 'As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ' (3. 27); and similarly, he wrote to the church in Rome: 'put on the Lord Jesus Christ' (13. 14).⁷

I wonder, which clothes are we wearing today? If we're not careful, we tend to get away from the basics, and we tend to fool ourselves. We need to remember that we Christians are part of the 'good and the bad' who were invited to the wedding banquet after the king's initial invitations had been refused. We, the 'good and the bad', need simply to be willing to put on the garment of Christ and to drop any delusions about our ability to save ourselves.

Perhaps we are not wearing any particularly righteous clothes at the moment; or perhaps we have been tempted lately to think that other garments will guarantee us admission to the banquet. It's so easy, isn't it, to have a feeling of self-sufficiency when we've done a few good works; or should I say, some good works that we rather fancy!⁸ All of these things are laudable, of course, and we should keep on doing them; but only if we do them for the right reasons. We do good works not in order to obtain the approval of God or to secure our salvation; rather, we do good works as we put on the righteousness of Christ; and note that we are called only to do the good works that *he invites us* to perform. Amen.

⁷ His words echo a verse in Isaiah that many of us will remember: 'I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.' (61. 10).

⁸ 'All our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth' (Is 64. 6).