

## Matthew 22:1-14

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: <sup>2</sup> "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. <sup>3</sup> He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.

<sup>4</sup> "Then he sent some more servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.'

<sup>5</sup> "But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. <sup>6</sup> The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. <sup>7</sup> The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

<sup>8</sup> "Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. <sup>9</sup> So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.' <sup>10</sup> So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

<sup>11</sup> "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. <sup>12</sup> He asked, 'How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?' The man was speechless.

<sup>13</sup> "Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie his hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

<sup>14</sup> "For many are invited, but few are chosen."

### The Parable of the Wedding Feast

You may remember from a few weeks ago that we had reached a point in Matthew's gospel where the chief priests and elders had come to try Jesus in the court of Jerusalem's public opinion, and to try to catch him out. He responded to them firstly with the parable of the two sons, then with the parable of the evil tenants in the vineyard, and now thirdly with this week's parable, about wedding guests — three parables which transparently accuse the religious establishment of failing to do what God had asked of them. Matthew's version of the wedding feast completes the trio of parables, all said within the hearing of these authority figures. As we look at this we must notice how it is similar and different to the version in Luke's gospel; what the point of the changes are; and again, as always, whether there is a lesson for us, or only for those listening at the time.

This parable is also in Luke's gospel in chapter 14. In that version, you may remember more detail is given about the excuses the guests give for not attending: 'I have bought a field and must see it; I have just got married; I'm washing my hair' — something like that. Matthew's version brushes past these as simply their various excuses, but then alters and adds different details to the parable.

Firstly it is not just a certain man, but a king who invites guests to the wedding of his son. Secondly, the guests not only give their excuses, but abuse and kill the servants who bring the message. This particularly violent behaviour then prompts the king to send his armies to destroy these murderers and their town. The story has become a lot more tense than Luke's version. But it's not over yet: when new guests, gathered last minute from the street corners, turn up, one of them is thrown out for not having wedding clothes. Jesus concludes that many are invited, but few are chosen.

It's clearly the same story, but the additional details present some challenges.

Last week I observed that the tenants in the vineyard didn't work as a story, only as an allegory. This banquet parable is similarly iffy — who would seriously refuse the king's prestigious invitation to a wedding banquet? Worse, who would beat up the servants bringing such an invitation? And how do these refusers all live in the same city, and the king simply decide to destroy this city? Further, if guests have been called from the streets, how does one then get picked out for not wearing wedding clothes? There are more problems, still, but you get the idea.

However, we're not really listening to this for the story. Jesus is highlighting the behaviour of the religious authorities through the ages. He knows this, we know it and they know it, and the story serves only to illustrate the absurdity and betrayal of their position. The detail of destroying the murderers and their city makes sense only when you know that Jesus is foretelling the destruction of the temple in AD70. It is not Jerusalem, but the temple, specifically, which is their city. And though last week I used the tenants in the vineyard parable to highlight that violence is human and not divine in origin, the king of Jesus's story does not refrain from violence either — though I still think my point of last week stands.

So, after three successive parables the members of the Sanhedrin, the elite of Israel, have got Jesus's message in no uncertain terms.

Now, what about the new wedding guests, drawn from the streets? That all makes sense doesn't it? Israel having refused the relationship with God that was offered, the offer is extended, through Jesus, to all people, to the gentiles and all people of the world. Why, then, is one of them thrown out for not having wedding clothes? It's not like he had weeks to plan his attire, is it?

Again, story detail has suffered at the expense of allegory, and our ignorance of the context. Wedding clothes were not a special set of clothes bought specifically for that wedding — like when all the bridesmaids are required to wear blue, or some such plan. It was simply that to attend a wedding you had to wear the best you had. You wore clean clothes (and we can all manage that), and preferably white. Turn up in dirty jeans and T shirt for a wedding and you haven't tried.

Now, is Jesus excluding the poor who only have one set of clothes and can't afford wedding clothes? No — it's a story! Nor is he setting up some elitist cult around quality tailoring (much as Savile Row would love that). Nor is Jesus saying you should always wear your Sunday best to church! No, this really isn't talking about clothes at all.

So what is he saying? That to come to the feast we must change. We must smarten up, we must be different, not in our clothes, but in what really matters — our hearts and words, and thoughts and prayers and actions. What we do and what we don't. There *is* a free ticket into heaven, just as there is a free invitation to the wedding banquet in the story, but entry to the wedding, entry to the Kingdom of Heaven, still requires that we change for the better. God's grace deserves our good response.

In this parable Jesus warns the religious establishment — the entitled men who were gathered around when he told the story — that they should not treat Israel's covenant with God (that is, the wedding invitation) with contempt. But the throwing out of a later guest is a warning to us, and all followers of Christ, not to treat that invitation with contempt either. If we love God, and try to love as Jesus has loved us, we are in no danger of that contempt.