

## **The King's Wedding Banquet** **(Matthew 22:1-14)**

**(A sermon preached at St Andrew's church, St Andrews, 12 October 2002)**

When we read the parables of Jesus in the Gospels it's often a good idea to read them first of all just as a story and not to jump too quickly into asking what they mean. We need first to appreciate the story at the level of story before we can see how that story also has a message to us. There's one other thing we have to be careful about in the case of today's parable from Matthew 22, and that is not to mix it up with another parable about people being invited to a banquet that comes in Luke's Gospel. The two parables are somewhat similar, but if we read details from one into the other we can spoil the different stories each one tells.

Our story is one in which the main character is a king. That's very unusual in the Gospel parables. Much more often Jesus has a householder or a landowner as the main character, the character who, in a certain sense, represents God. Stories about householders and landowners were closer to familiar life for most of Jesus' hearers, but in this case Jesus talks about a king because this is very much a story about political affairs. The king's son is to be married and the king is planning the wedding celebration. The marriage of the king's son and heir is obviously a great occasion of state, a festal occasion of enormous importance and with obviously major political resonances. For the great men of the kingdom invited to the banquet this will be an occasion not only to demonstrate their loyalty to the king but also to pledge their allegiance to his son and heir, to guarantee (as it were) the succession to the throne.

That means that, when they ignore the king's invitation, they are making a political statement. This is insurrection. And they know very well what they're doing. Notice they offer no apologies or excuses. They respond with not even formal politeness. Evidently they are not willing to give their loyalty to the king's son and support the succession to the throne. When some of them, invited a second time - that is, given a second chance to show their allegiance - kill the king's messengers, this is open and unequivocal rebellion. So the king does what kings do about rebellions: he sends his troops to destroy the rebels and to raze to the ground the rebel cities they governed.

"The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy," he says. He had invited the obvious people, the great men of his kingdom, the people one would expect to be at such an occasion, but they had treated his invitation with contempt. They have proved unworthy of it. But the king cannot cancel the banquet. This is his son's wedding; it must be celebrated; there must be guests to fill the banqueting hall. But where can worthy guests be found, guests who will not spurn the invitation but be glad to be there and really share the joy of the occasion with the king? This is the question the rest of the story is about. Who will prove worthy to be a guest at the wedding banquet?

The king decides just to offer an indiscriminate invitation to all and sundry. The servants go out into the main streets of the city - the obvious places to find a lot of

people - and invite everybody they see. All sorts of people. "Good and bad" the parable says. There's no selectivity any more, anyone can come.

But of course one had to dress properly for such an occasion. That meant wearing a longer garment than the one you wore for working and also a garment that was as close to white as you could get. White was the colour of celebration, but it was expensive: only rich people could afford cloth you could get really white. But everyone could wear a clean garment that was as near to white as they could get. Poor people who possessed only one garment would borrow a festive garment for a special occasion. Or sometimes they had the hem of the garment stitched up to make it short for ordinary use, but could let it down to make it longer for festive use. So there was really no problem about everyone being able to wear a garment suitable for the occasion - and, of course, most people would want to. If you're going to a party and expect to enjoy yourself, you take some trouble over what you wear.

So the king is surprised to see someone there wearing his everyday clothes, dirty from his work. The king is surprised and *we* should be just as surprised. The king's question - "My friend, how do you come to be here without wedding clothes?" - is not yet a condemnation, but a real question. He's giving the man the chance to explain if there's been some misunderstanding or special circumstance. But the man has nothing to say. He can't explain himself. 'What was he thinking of when he came without a wedding garment?,' we may think. It's puzzling and the parable means us to be puzzled.

What is clear is that he hasn't taken the occasion seriously as the special party that it is. He's dishonouring the king and the occasion. He's disdainful of the king's invitation just as surely as the great men originally invited had done. They had refused the invitation; he had accepted it - ostensibly - but now treats it with contempt while actually attending the feast. In effect, he has not really accepted the invitation, since the invitation was not just to be physically present, but to participate in the king's rejoicing over the marriage of his son. The other guests show their participation in the occasion by wearing their party clothes. This man, who can't be bothered to do that, is not a real guest.

The very end of the story is a little odd. It is only to be expected that the king will order the man to be thrown out of the banqueting hall. But the way he puts it is extravagant: "Bind him hand and foot; fling him out into the dark, the place of wailing and grinding of teeth." Right at the end here, you see, the story stops being realistic. This is not what would literally happen in the world of the story. It's the language of *God's* judgment on those excluded from the kingdom *of God*. Jesus often uses such language, so the meaning is very clear. The effect is to jolt hearers or readers of the story who have followed it just as a story, as we have - the effect is to jolt us readers into a sudden awareness that the story is saying something rather important. Actually it's about God's kingdom and about a danger of exclusion from God's kingdom that evidently faces us all.

Who is worthy to attend God's great celebration of his kingdom? Not necessarily the big and important people - I mean people big and important by the standards of this world, the people one would expect to be invited if God cared anything about which people are thought to be important in this world's affairs and judgments. All too often

such people don't even bother to reply to the invitation: they've too much invested in the ways of this world, they're altogether too content with what they're getting out of the system of this world to be interested in signing up to God's alternative kingdom.

It's not necessarily the big and important people who are worthy to attend God's great celebration of his kingdom. Actually, all and sundry are invited. All sorts of people. Good and bad. You don't have to be a good person to get God's invitation. Jesus himself delivered that invitation by mixing with the most dubious characters and the most looked-down on people in the society of his time. You don't have to qualify at all to get God's invitation. That's grace, and we often don't take it seriously enough. What God did in Jesus was to fling open the gates of his banqueting hall to anyone at all who wants to come to share his joy and to pledge their allegiance to his kingdom.

All that is required is real willingness to accept the invitation, really to honour the occasion, really to rejoice with the king. All that is required is real recognition of what it is God invites us to. Not to bother to change into party clothes, just to come in off the streets in our dirty clothes as though this were nothing different from our evening meal at home - of course we can't do that. The parable is a serious warning that those who are unworthy of God's kingdom are not only people who spurn the Gospel invitation but also those who ostensibly accept it while rejecting what it really represents.

I said the parable intends us to be puzzled about the man without the wedding garment. What was going on in his mind? Why did he accept the invitation but not do the obvious thing that accepting the invitation required of him? It wasn't a difficult thing to do. And he can offer no explanation of it.

It seems absurd behaviour - and the point is that it *is* absurd behaviour to be invited to God's great banquet, to accept the invitation, but to go on as though nothing out of the ordinary were happening, not to let it affect our lives, not to see that this is the most important and wonderful thing that has ever happened to us or ever could happen to us. It's like going to a house where a party is going on, ignoring the party and just doing what you would do anyway - cooking your breakfast in the kitchen, taking a bath, getting down to some work in the study. You couldn't complain about being left out of the party, since it was you who ignored it. What an absurd thing to do, says the parable, when what you're missing is God's great party for all the world.

Our Communion service, today as every Sunday, is a little taste of that great celebration God invites all people to. Let's not take our invitation lightly, let's not take it for granted, let's come to the Lord's banqueting table wanting to be part of what God is doing in the world, sharing God's joy and pledging our allegiance to his kingdom.