

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet
Twentieth Sunday After Trinity
(From the Gospel: *St. Matthew xxii. 1-14*)

King James Version (KJV) *1 And Jesus answered and spake unto them again by parables, and said, 2 The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son, 3 And sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come. 4 Again, he sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come unto the marriage. 5 But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise: 6 And the remnant took his servants, and entreated them spitefully, and slew them. 7 But when the king heard thereof, he was wroth: and he sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city. 8 Then saith he to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy. 9 Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage. 10 So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good: and the wedding was furnished with guests. 11 And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment: 12 And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless. 13 Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 14 For many are called, but few are chosen.*

Today's text arises from Jesus' ministry at the Temple during the week that culminated in His crucifixion. It is the climax of His three year ministry. The Triumphal Entry has just occurred, when He had enjoyed the adoration of the entire city. But the hatred that has been building against Him amongst His enemies is nearing its crescendo.

Our Lord intentionally used parables with double intent, to confound his opponents and to instruct His followers. Regarding His frequent use of them, He offered His disciples these mysterious words:

Mark 4:10: And when he was alone, they that were about him with the twelve asked of him the parable. 11 And he said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables: 12 That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them.

The parable obliges the attentive listener to think. But to those just seeking entertainment, Jesus' tale might seem only like another good story. They would enjoy the narrative, but derive nothing from it. They might be amused, and perhaps even a bit puzzled, wondering both what the significance of the story was, and what the motive was for telling it, but not have the incentive to inquire further. But for those who knew that Christ was intent and earnest, and that nothing would fall from His lips except that which was of divine importance, listening to Him involved heart, body, and soul. Those who despised Him also attended very closely to His words, but only to fuel their hatred and rejection, and to gain evidence against Him.

This parable is deadly serious. It is one of several texts spoken directly against the Jewish nation, which, as a whole, would reject Christ as their King and Messiah. But it carries with it themes that are applicable through all of time.

The scene is absolutely improbable. How could guests to a wedding banquet, that of the son of a king, no less, with the prospect of the celebration, festivity, and hospitality of a royal host, find anything better in their schedules to attend to? In the parallel story found in Luke (14:15-23), the invited guests *all alike began to make excuses* (vs. 18), ridiculous excuses, one might add. But in today's Gospel, their sneering contempt for the host is made much plainer: not only are they rude and thoughtless in their rejection of the invitation, but choose the unthinkable response of abusing and even murdering the king's emissaries. They are not merely apathetic and indifferent to an act of generosity with no strings attached, but treat the invitation as if it were something despicable. The king has no choice but to answer such wickedness with the justice it deserved: he executes them for a capital crime, as it were. For in their mistreatment of the king, on such a significant occasion, they might just as well have murdered him, and stomped on his remains. Those whom the host had deemed worthy of attending this most important event of his life had demonstrated beyond a doubt their utter unworthiness. They could not have done so more effectively.

But the wedding still must take place, and guests are still required. What could be more shameful and dishonorable than a feast of such magnificence and solemnity remaining unattended? Such a humiliation would affect not only the king, but the whole country. And so the king fills the hall with uninvited guests --*both bad and good*-- rounded up from the street corners and lanes. They are hustled into the party, just as they were, quickly covered with appropriate wedding clothes, and brought in to the king's presence to enjoy an occasion they had not anticipated in their wildest dreams. One can imagine the surprise and pleasure and wonder written on their faces.

Already we must attempt to draw inferences. It says something about the human heart that those who assumed they would be invited, and were certain that they were of the right social class to merit their attendance, and who were already "partied-out" with their own extravagance and self-indulgence, esteemed this occasion to be of little or no value to them. Their privileged position had filled them with pride and smugness, instead of humility and gratitude. Their self-honor was of such a proportion that they not only dishonored their monarch, at whose expense they lived, but elevated themselves above him. It is impropriety to the extreme, behavior more fitted to savages and wild men, than to the civilized subjects of a king.

The king, then, is now obliged himself to find a people worthy of his invitation, who will put up no resistance, ask no questions, who have no other priorities than to gladly join in him in

his celebration, even if he must start, as it were, from scratch... with “street people”! The king himself will assume the task of making them worthy merely by his invitation of them, and by also shouldering the expense of clothing them appropriately to the occasion. Those who should have known better, missed everything, and those who knew nothing at all, gained all. The result is that the king retained his honor, the wedding went on, and propriety was returned to a land which otherwise would have been disgraced and ruined by the conduct of its citizens.

One peculiar detail remains: a man who has entered the feast *not wearing wedding clothes* (11b, NIV). When he is questioned as to how he might have the hubris to appear at the event in such a condition, *the man was speechless*. He had apparently crept in with the crowd, expecting equal treatment with them, but had failed to submit, whether through ignorance or willfulness, to even the minimal requirements expected of this new crowd of substitute guests. Having come in presumptuously on his own terms, he is summarily ejected *outside, into the darkness* (13), where presumably he joins those who have already rejected the wedding.

The Gospel message for us underlying the parable is, of course, so obvious: the King, God the Father, invites all to the wedding of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. His Bride is all true believers: the Church. The substitute wedding guests and the bride really are the same: those claiming no righteousness of their own. Humbled by life and circumstance, they are in a position to be brought into God’s presence by virtue of worthiness freely bestowed upon them by the generosity and hospitality of God, but only at the greatest possible expense, that of the death of the Son. Those who disqualified themselves by spurning the Gospel offer, or by imagining that they could enter His presence with their own contrived righteousness, will never *get a taste of [His] supper* (Luke 14:24), and be consigned to that place *where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*.

The parable closes with these austere words: *For many are invited, but few are chosen* (14). This presents a paradoxical truth that confronts us over and over again when we consider that gravest of topics: the sovereignty of God...: His right to make choices based solely upon His own will, purpose, and goodness, choices that may defy human logic, but will ultimately be justified, precisely and only because they are God’s. *Many were invited...*, all the citizenry, rich and poor, well-appointed and obscure, high and low, religious and irreligious. But the vast majority who opted out for a host of reasons --excuses that might be entirely acceptable by today’s utilitarian standards-- excluded themselves from among those favored ones who would be welcomed into the king’s company. By contrast, those who were in effect uninformed, unprepared, clueless due to their circumstances, found themselves amazingly... among the *chosen*!

[T]hey which were bidden were not worthy (8b). Those who choose to not submit to the terms of the Gospel judge themselves unworthy of it. Those who choose to accept them without question find themselves among the *chosen*.

That's all there is to it.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.