

### **Come to the banquet.**

If you grew up in the church – or if you’ve had anything to do with Sunday school in the last fifty or more years, this morning’s reading from Matthew 22 probably put you instantly in mind of a particular song.:

*A certain man held a feast on his fine estate in town. He laid a festive table and wore a wedding gown. He sent invitations to his neighbours far and wide but when the meal was ready, each of them replied:*

*I cannot come ....I cannot come to the banquet, don't trouble me now. I have married a wife; I have bought me a cow. I have fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum. Pray, hold me excused, I cannot come.*

A memorable song - but you may have noticed that the song doesn’t quite match the parable. The song doesn’t mention the invitees killing the messengers, nor the king sending troops out to destroy the murderers and burn their city.

That’s because the song isn’t based on Matthew 22 – it’s based on Luke 14 (v15-23), and the parable that Luke recounts is a bit different to the parable in Matthew.

Some people get a bit worried about that, and say that they can’t both be right, or that because they’re different neither can be right.

While the parables of the wedding banquet in Luke and Matthew are similar, they’re told on very different occasions: The parable in Luke’s account is told in the house of a Pharisee before Jesus enters Jerusalem, but here in Matthew it is told in the temple courts after Jesus has entered Jerusalem – after Palm Sunday, and during that week when tensions between the temple leaders and Jesus were rising dramatically.

We read that: Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. (22:1-2)

So the king is given a wedding banquet, and he sends “his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.”(22:3)

They wouldn’t come. The Jewish people, the nation of Israel, had been waiting for the messiah since Genesis times. Since the dawn of history – in fact since before they were even a nation or a people. They had been waiting for the messiah, the Christ, to save them. To restore them to their promised land, drive out the occupiers, to put things right.

But you know, you can so easily get used to the way things are. Particularly if the way things are works out well for you personally – say if you’re a chief priest, or a Pharisee.

Why would you go to a wedding banquet and honour someone else, when you can eat pretty well at home?

So the king “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.’ (22:4)

So he’s moved on from a simple invitation to a demand. It’s not like the invitation to our street’s annual (or roughly annual) street party – which has a vague start and end time, and a general invitation to participate as and when it suits. But this wedding banquet – just like many wedding celebrations today, is an important event, if you’re invited, you need to attend.

“But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business” (22:5) – there’s no chance that they didn’t get the invitation, no chance they misunderstood. They flatly refused to attend.

And it turns out that those who simply paid no attention to the invitation and went away were pretty good compared to the other invitees who we heard seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. (22:6) Now, that’s clearly over the top. Seriously, people don’t want to go to a wedding so they kill the messenger? That would never happen, would it? But yet Jesus says it, and he does it to emphasise the points he’s making – just like the parable of the wicked tenants we looked at last week. It is hyperbole. It’s not a story of an actual wedding.

Jesus tells us that king was enraged. He sent his army, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. (22:7). Things had really escalated, hadn’t they? From a simple invitation made and turned down, to murder, and then to the destruction of a whole city!

But the parable doesn’t even end there! The king says those invited didn’t really deserve to be invited, so he sends out more servants – into the streets, to invite anyone they could find. And not just anyone, but everyone. And Jesus is clear in saying that bad as well as good were to be invited, and they all gathered in the wedding hall. Many were called, and they filled the wedding hall, and they would get to eat the dinner, including the fatted calves and the prized oxen. They weren’t expecting an invitation, and certainly didn’t ‘deserve’ one, but they got to be there anyway!

What a turn around! From ignored invitations, to a full banquet hall. Guests enjoying a magnificent feast.

And wouldn’t that be a great ending to the story? And indeed, in the song, and in the parable in Luke’s gospel, that is how the story ends – everyone celebrating. The song adds a bit of reminder at the end:

*Now God has written a lesson for the rest of mankind:*

*If we are slow in responding he may leave us behind.*

*He’s preparing a banquet for that great and glorious day,*

*When the Lord and Master calls us be certain not to say:*

*I cannot come...*

But the parable in Matthew's gospel has a real sting in the tail...

But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. He asked, 'How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?' The man was speechless.. (22:11-12)

At first glance, these later verses (22:11-) sound like a bit of a turnaround from inviting everyone. The king has said to his servants, invite everyone – good or bad – it doesn't matter, just invite them in. But now the king has spotted someone not dressed appropriately, and he singled him out for special attention. "How did you get in here without a wedding clothes?" How did you get in here without changing out of your street clothes? He still calls him 'Friend', but wouldn't a friend – a real friend – have made the effort to change? It's often suggested that the tradition at the time would have been for the host to provide the wedding robe for guests to wear for the banquet – so it wouldn't have been the case that a guest *would not have had* access to the appropriate clothes. There was a robe available, but that guest had chosen not to wear it.

And then things get very bad for the one who hadn't changed "Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'" (22:13)

Ouch.

This is one of the parts of the bible that Christians are sometimes uncomfortable talking about. Or perhaps uncomfortable with, full stop.

"...the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.."

The imagery has moved from simply not being at a banquet, to something far worse.

What are we to make of it?

Because we know verses such as 1 Peter 3:18 For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God.

Jesus did die for all – so how do we reconcile that with someone being thrown into the outer darkness?

I think we can turn to John 3:16 for understanding For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

God loved the world so much that he gave his Son, but there is a requirement to respond to that gift, to believe in him - to put our trust and our hope in him. To turn away from our old ways and turn to God. To change – and to allow ourselves to be change. To put on the metaphorical wedding clothes that God offers us.

God's grace shown to us in Jesus is freely available to all who turn to him in faith, but there is a response required.

And Jesus brings it all home in the last verse of this reading when he says: "For many are invited, but few are chosen." (22:14)

It is an uncomfortable truth. But I think it's also our own experience: We know that the good news of Jesus proclaimed throughout the world, but how many people do you know that haven't responded to that good news? They might have been too busy – married a wife or bought a cow – or they might have responded in a superficial or fleeting way - perhaps 'turned up' to church occasionally, ticked the box marked 'Christian' on the census form, but not put their faith in Jesus. Not worn their metaphorical wedding clothes – not changed in response to what Jesus has done for them.

It is an uncomfortable truth.

The parable that Jesus has told here has taken us from a view of limited salvation – that only a select few would be invited, and that was certainly the view of the Pharisees and the chief priests: that the nation of Israel had a unique claim to God's favour- they were convinced that they had special seats at God's banquet table . But Jesus moved on from there to tell them - and us - that everyone can be a recipient of God's grace, but then there is a qualifier: That although salvation is available for all through the grace of God, it is necessary that we are changed by that grace.

Many are invited, but few are chosen.

The theme of judgement, which comes up often in the gospels, isn't a popular thing to talk about ... but I think we lose something – and something important (and indeed central) to our faith if we ignore it.

We can look around at the world, and our society, and even at our relationships and we can see that things aren't good. There are many, many things wrong. And we look forward to a time when all things will be made right – but for things to be made right, the things that are wrong need to be dealt with.

And that can be by repentance – turning away from the wrong things – or by judgement – dealing with the wrong things. And it's not for us to judge, it's for God. God will put things right: and God will do that through the grace of Christ, and through judgement.

Strange as it might seem at first, judgement is part of the good news.

There can be a tendency to dwell on the last verses of this reading, the casting out into the darkness of the one who didn't change. To focus on the fact that few are chosen.

But I think if that's our focus then we risk thinking that the change itself is what is important, that we must simply work hard to change ourselves – instead we must be open to God through the Holy spirit changing us.

While we should remember that few are chosen, the good news is that many are invited (or in some translations, many are called. Sure enough, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone - or indeed anyone (as this parable emphasises) - who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Our privilege is to take our place in the banquet hall of God, and wear the wedding clothes of lives which are changed in grateful obedience to our Lord and saviour.

And it is also our privilege to be God's servants and to go out into the world and invite people in to the banquet. To quote the song one last time:

*When all the poor had assembled there was still room to spare, So the master demanded:  
Go search everywhere. Search the highways and the byways, and tell them to come in: my table must be filled before the banquet can begin.*

And that is what Jesus tells his disciples later in Matthew's gospel: [he] came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Matt 28:18-20a)

The invitation to the banquet hall of God, the invitation to turn in faith to Jesus is good news, and good news needs to be shared, and sharing that good news is part of how we change in response to all that God has done for us.

And that good news is good news for all. It isn't restricted by birth or status or race or background. Many are called: God is not the God of only the privileged.

God is the God of the poor, the friend of the weak. And when we truly put our trust in Christ, our lives will be changed in gracious obedience.

**Amen.**