

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstons Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
11 October 2020

Matthew 22:1-14

On the morning of her birthday, a woman told her husband, “I just dreamed that you gave me a diamond necklace. What do you think it means?” He responded, “Maybe you’ll find out tonight.” That evening, the man came home with a small package and gave it to his wife. Excitedly, she ripped off the wrapping paper and found a book titled “The meaning of dreams.”

Today I will preach on what happened at a very special wedding banquet, so I thought it would be fun to tell a joke about husbands and wives. Anyway, it is difficult for us to understand fully the parable in Matthew 22 because we don’t live in a monarchy. If we lived in a monarchy at the time of Jesus we would know that every subject owes his or her king the utmost respect, obedience, honor, and allegiance. You live your life at the king’s pleasure. Everything you owe can be taken by the king who ultimately owns everything you possess, including your wife and children. The king deserves your loyalty, your taxes, your respect, and your very life. Who you are and what you have both belong to the king to do with as he pleases. Even Jesus is mindful of the authority of earthly kings, and it is for this reason that he says on the issue of taxes, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”

Let us talk about this parable. First, we have been away from Matthew for three weeks, The first week we talked about Jonah, the second week we preached on Ezekiel, and last week we talked about Isaiah. So, you may be wondering what happened in Matthew during the last three weeks. There were three parables in Matthew 21 and 22 that speak about the Kingdom of God. And we saw some of these while we were touring the Old Testament. These are parables that tell us that the Kingdom of God requires doing the will of the Father, as in the parable of the two sons who were asked to go work in the vineyard. The Kingdom of God is like a vineyard taken from unfaithful tenants and given to tenants willing to produce fruit, as in the parable of the wicked tenants. And then, the Kingdom of God is like a banquet given by a king, which is our parable for today.

We see from the very beginning of this parable that this is no ordinary banquet. This is “a wedding banquet for the King’s son.” This is a wedding banquet for the future king, the heir to the kingdom. To be invited to this banquet is a great honor. Here you have the opportunity to show your allegiance, respect, and devotion not just to a king, who by all accounts appears to be a good king, but also to the future king. This may be the single most important invitation you ever receive. How you respond to this invitation might determine your life and the life of your family for many years to come.

To refuse to attend such a banquet is unthinkable. Richard Bauckham says: “To refuse the invitation is tantamount to rebellion. In refusing it, the invitees are deliberately treating the king's authority with contempt. They know full well that their behavior will be understood as insurrection. This is what they intend, and those who kill the king's messengers only make this intention known more emphatically” (*The Parable of the Royal Wedding Feast, Matthew 22:1-14*, Journal of Biblical Literature, Fall 1996. p. 484.)

Those invited refused to attend the banquet. Luke places a number of excuses on the lips of those invited (Luke 14:16-24: “I have bought a piece of land and need to go inspect it,” “I have bought 5 oxen and need to care for them,” “I just got married and can't attend), but in today's version from Matthew there are no excuses. Those invited simply ignore or “make light” of the invitation and go about their business as usual. In fact some even kill the messengers. This is political rebellion against the king. The king deals with this treason in the usual way kings deal with insurrections. He sent his troops and destroyed the city. Their disobedience cost them their lives, their property and the lives of their families. Even though this was an honorable and good king, he deals with the insurrection with quick and swift justice. The wicked and ungrateful servants are destroyed.

The good and just king does not decide to cancel the party, just the opposite. Rather than a few selected guests, as he had originally intended, now he decides to invite everyone. He says to his slaves, “The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.” Everyone is invited now, “both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.” The refusal of those originally invited is regrettable, but the banquet goes on, the King opens the doors to everyone, regardless of social class or moral standing. All that is required is that they show up and that they wear a wedding robe. Clean and appropriate celebratory garments are a sign of respect towards the host who invited you. So, all are required to wear appropriate clothes.

Much theological commentary has been written about the banquet robes. The tradition would have been that all invited guests would have gone home, selected their best garment, washed it and wore it. Some would even be expected to borrow clothes from neighbors. Saint Augustine early in the history of the Church interpreted this passage to mean that the King himself would provide the garments to wear. According to some commentators, there is Biblical precedent for a king providing the wedding robes for his guests (2 Kings 10:22; Isaiah 61:10; Romans 13:12-14; Galatians 3:27; Ephesians 4:24; 6:11; Colossians 3:9-10; 1 Thessalonias 5:8; see also Luke 15:22; Revelation 3:4; 6:11; 19:8. For more see www.crossmarks.com.)

This fits in with what we know about wedding banquets at the time of Jesus. These were week-long affairs and people arrived at different times, some of them traveling long distances. It would be tradition that washing basins would be provided for guests upon entrance into the hall, as many of them were dirty and tired after the travel. After purification, the guests would be allowed in. In the case of today's parable (According to St. Augustine) robes would be given to

those too poor to have one. I believe that this is where Paul gets some of his theology about putting on Christ, or wearing Christ as a robe. Anyway, the guests are in and everyone is wearing a robe. "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?'"

Think about this for a second. If we accept Augustine's interpretation that the robes were given by the king himself at the door, how did this man get in? Again, there are various interpretations. To me, it is clear that this fellow was an insider. He was already there before the banquet started. He did not come from the outside in, but was already in. He perhaps did not feel he had to wear a robe because he presumed he didn't need one. He was well-known. He belonged there! He took the King's mandates as applicable to others and not to himself. Perhaps this is what Christ means when he says, "Not all who say, 'Lord, Lord' will come into the Kingdom of God, but those who do the will of my Father." Being inside requires that we do the will of our Host, which includes putting on the appropriate robes he himself provides.

My friends, the parable today is about accepting God's free invitation to come into his Kingdom, an invitation to come into the wedding banquet of his Son, which is another way of saying, an invitation to accept Christ himself in our lives. We re-enact this banquet invitation every week when we come to the Holy Eucharist. We will continue to reenact it until we come to the mountain of the Lord of Hosts, where God himself will have for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear," as Isaiah 25 tells us today. I often wonder what excuse will ever be good enough to refuse God's invitation to come to this banquet. I often wonder with sadness about what could be more important than this banquet, where God himself provides the invitation, the banquet food, and the wedding robes. All we need to do is show up and put on the robe of new life, the robe of the Christian life, the garment of salvation.

My friends, we can not come to this banquet unless we are willing to put on Christ. This banquet will change us from the inside out. We can not go back to our normal lives as though nothing happened. This banquet will transform us into more loving, more kind, more obedient people. If we are not changed by this banquet into people willing to obey the will of God for our lives, then there will be no difference between this banquet and happy hour at you local sports bar.

I pray that we will not be like the insider at the banquet who took his host for granted and presumed his own salvation without a wedding robe. I pray that we all put on Christ by living a life worthy of him. I pray that we all do as Christ did, and live as he lived. All for the service of God and others. Amen!