

St Brandon's, Sermon for 14<sup>th</sup> October 2017  
Matthew 22. 1-14 (Isaiah 25.1-9; Philippians 4.1-9)

### **Wedding Attendance**

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Sermons based on personal experience are often the best way to go, I am told. Ironically, this sermon was written in the midst of a wedding, and I was both at the wedding, and definitely not wearing the right sort of clothes. That was because I was on duty as caretaker and manager of the venue.

It was of limited help in interpreting this uncomfortable parable – I don't think the person the King threw out was the caretaker! but it did feel oddly relevant to be immersed in that setting as I thought about this, and it caused me to reflect differently on myself in response to the parable.

A parable is a story constructed to be heard on several levels, to make people wonder and think, and come to their own conclusions about how they may or may not understand the story.

Whether they are part of that story.

What it might be saying to them uniquely, since everyone experiences a parable personally.

The story line for this parable is about the coming of God's kingdom.

This is the era that was initiated with the coming of Jesus, and will conclude at his second coming.

The era we are living in now that was very new history at the time Jesus was speaking.

The era that many in the temple disbelieved as having arrived: they viewed Jesus as an imposter and threat and rejected the idea that he was sent by God.

The image Jesus uses of the wedding banquet is the same one that Isaiah talks about in the first reading we heard and would have been very familiar to his audience.

It is the time yet to come, the time at the end time when God makes all things right, and Jesus comes into his kingdom.

It is foretold as the time when all people and all creation become healed and comforted, when goodness and providence prevail, tears and death are no more.

When the Lord will make for all peoples a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food: the time of the Lord's coming when Isaiah says

*'it will be said on that day, this is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.'*

The same theme is in the psalm:

*'you spread a table before me ... my cup shall be full'.*

The invitation to be a guest at the wedding banquet is the focus of the parable.

Throughout the parable, we hear only the King's words, no-one else speaks.

The King who gives the wedding banquet is God, and he gives it for his Son; the Son being

Jesus. So Jesus is telling the story through the authority of God's words and actions.

The slaves who act as messengers are the prophets that God had been sending since the beginning - Abraham, Moses, all those big names God sent to teach his chosen people that he was their God, inviting them to respond by behaving as his people and keeping his commandments.

But they chased after other gods and declined that first invitation.

The invitation is repeated and more prophets are sent, and they get murdered, as indeed happened.

The destruction of those who killed the prophets and the burning of their city is a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 BC, so very much part of the recent history of the priests and pharisees to whom Jesus is talking.

Perhaps the priests and pharisees are going to realise that he is talking about them, the chosen people of Israel. About them, as the ones who refused to listen to, and acknowledge Jesus. Who rejected his teaching and were actively plotting to kill him. They are the ones to whom the invitation was first given.

*“The wedding is ready”*, says the King: Jesus is about to come into his kingdom through the cross and resurrection: he is about to defeat death by rising to new life, and thereby usher in the kingdom that is come and is yet to come.

*“The wedding is ready but those invited were not worthy.”*

The next move is where we as church enter stage right:

*“Go therefore into the main streets and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet”*

The invitation to be one of God's chosen is thrown open to everyone, including you and me. God was no longer just for the Jews but also for the gentiles – which means all the rest of humanity, both good and bad – and we filled the wedding hall.

It seems there was no bouncer on the door looking at people's credentials to see if we were worthy of admission based on past behaviour, both good and bad were invited in off the streets. Both good and bad have dressed up and come on in. Whoopee!

Yet, the King, coming in to see the guests, and presumably kick-off the celebrations, notices one who is not wearing a wedding robe and challenges him.

This represents the judgement at the end of time, the judgement that is said will precede the huge banquet – the Isaiah banquet when the kingdom is fulfilled.

The man who is not wearing a wedding robe represents a class of people we are warned will fall at the last judgement.

As a picture, the person without robes at the wedding feast contrasts with pictures we are given elsewhere in the bible about how the righteous will be clothed in glory.

Is this about the judgement of the life the person led?

The choices about how to live, righteously, or unrighteously, demonstrating through their good works or lack of, their true response to God?

Another interpretation is that the person was **not** one of God's elect.

At the time the parable was told, it was the tradition that the host of a wedding provides the guests with their wedding robes. When I read about this it put me in mind of the sashes that get handed out these days: yesterday's wedding featured a pink shiny sash saying 'flower girl' (and given to a big bloke, of course!). God hands his sashes to those he has chosen, and some, particularly the Jews in their tradition, view this as a matter of inheritance – birth entitlement rather than open to all and dependent on our acceptance.

So this interpretation would be that there are those who are chosen, and there are those who are not, and that is God's prerogative at the end.

Personally, whilst I appreciate that judgement lies with God, and I cannot be certain what God may decide about me, everything I know about God assures me that he is a faithful and loving God and I have nothing to fear if I am loving and faithful in response. (That's the tricky bit).

So where does the parable take **us**? Where might it say to us? Does it make for uncomfortable listening?

Its possible to take the view that we are the chosen, after all, we profess to be Christians, we turn up to church and possibly even say our prayers more often than just on a Sunday; we might try **really** hard to follow the way.

But this parable reminds us that the King will have a good look at us when we present ourselves as guests at that final banquet. What clothes will we be wearing?

When this parable was spoken, it was on the verge of the church forming.

For us, 2,000 years on, the excitement and imminence of the kingdom coming has worn off for most who are not newly born-again Christians.

We are liable to behave much more like the pharisees and priests than we might like to think.

I can certainly talk for myself here.

I can easily and often find I am letting the apparently urgent demands of work take priority over taking time for God, or for 'good works'.

I may know of several people who my good intentions are to visit, but they never get visited because the household chores, seem to get in the way.

I'm not beyond weighing up whether I would rather spend some time with God in prayer, or mow the lawn – amazingly, you guessed it – its absolutely essential, it would seem, that I mow the lawn.

Not always, but often, the lure of achieving something tangible outweighs the promise of something intangible,  
however wonderful it may be painted.

Prayer can feel dry and dutiful instead of loving and conversant, so instead of sticking at it, I let myself justify slipping off to the farm or my business when the invitation to pause and take a little time to get to know God better, is offered.

Not only might I be prioritising my household/farm/business over time with or for God, but given said household/farm/business may be jogging along quite happily and solidly, it doesn't seem to be doing any harm to drift that way.

There is a huge temptation to assume success in these material things is somehow connected to being deserving, and being 'rewarded' by God for being a 'good' person.

Even being rewarded for merely being part of his club,  
even if I've never done anything more than subscribe to join.

This complacency about being entitled, or it being only fair to reward people for good behaviour is deeply ingrained in us through societies' expectations.

It is deeply **not** what God offers us through Jesus:

God offers us an open invitation to respond to Jesus and be saved through our faith alone.

Complacency and a sense of entitlement is one of the biggest suffocaters of faith.

The best remedy for complacency is bit more self-examination, and bit more personal effort in how we respond to God's love for us.

And if how to live more righteously seems a puzzle, and we want to be pointed the right way, the bible is our guide,  
and a passage like the one we have today from Paul in his letter to the Phillipians is a great place to start.

Read it again at home, and reflect on how properly or improperly you might be clothed, and aspire to improve that wardrobe.

Paul uses elsewhere the term 'clothe yourself with Christ'.

That is the invitation, and that is what we are called to do.

*Amen*