

St Brandon's, Sermon for 11th October 2020.

Philippians 4:1–9, Matthew 22:1-14

Wedding Banquets

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Gosh, that parable finishes with squirmily unpleasant ending! It reminds me how anxious I'd feel about what I might wear to a wedding; how, as the wedding day approached, the anticipated pleasure of the occasion would get dominated by this unresolved issue, and not much improved by the certainty I'd not chosen well once I was there, and the wedding underway.

Am I alone in that?

Therefore, when I read this, I feel sympathy for the guest that's spotted in the wrong garments – and then I learn I'm in outer darkness with them. So confusing. And so unhelpful. And not the full picture.

This is another parable about the Kingdom of Heaven, what its like and what to expect.

When I preached before on the Kingdom of Heaven, I concluded that it is a term Matthew uses to identify the bit of God that is inside us, that bubbles up and grows in us, and directs our actions.

In subsequent sermons we've heard who is set to get into the Kingdom of God: the so-called 'losers' in society are likely to be the first, and the ones who do God's will, not the one who said 'yes', then failed to do it.

Matthew uses both the terms 'Kingdom of Heaven', and 'Kingdom of God'.

I am intrigued to know whether they are distinctive?

I am not scholarly enough to explore that question by going back into the original languages but I feel as though I am seeing a pattern of usage that points to the Kingdom of Heaven as our internal relationship with God, and the Kingdom of God as the social outworking we are called to be part of. If anyone can shed scholarly light on this, I'd be intrigued to hear more.

In my scheme of understanding, you do need the Kingdom of Heaven – your internal faith - to be working in you, to be fuelled for tackling the Kingdom of God – working towards Godly directions in our society, through our day to day living.

What then seems to be happening in this parable, if its intended to help us understand better what the Kingdom of Heaven is, and how it works – what we are called to do or be?

The King, in this parable is God, the King's son is Jesus, and the wedding banquet is the banquet talked about that will come at the end of time, along with judgement - the banquet described in Psalm 23:

*' You spread a table before me
In the presence of those who trouble me;
You anoint my head with oil
and my cup shall be full.'*

The original guests were those in the temple where Jesus was talking; among them, those who were unconvinced by him; Jesus puts the spotlight on them as those who *'made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business'*. He then turns the spotlight on those in the temple already plotting to trap and kill him as they killed the prophets before him *'those who seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them'*; and alludes to the destruction of the temple in 70CE in the *'burning of their city'*.

Jesus then points to the width of God's invitation. The banquet is not going to be stopped by the failure of the temple leaders to recognise Jesus – the fact that those first invited were not worthy – the servants are to *"Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet."* The gathering in of the gentiles, the good and bad, the founding of the church.

Then comes the judgement, the banquet, and the king comes to inspect his guests and notices one who was not wearing a wedding robe. I either blush for myself, or feel concern for my unfortunate fellow guest: perhaps they could not manage the cost or had no opportunity to get the right clothes ... what happened to Jesus being the champion of the down and out?

But to react like that is to forget that God does not look at the clothing as we would, he doesn't judge us on our fashion sense. God sees the very depths of our being, the workings of our heart, the longings of our souls. God is looking at the life before him, and finds it entirely inappropriate for the calling. He does not see a person fit or ready to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, to participate in building the Kingdom of God.

In this parable Jesus is speaking beyond the time of the temple audience to us, individually and as church today. We are his guests, invited to his banquet: invited to receive and explore eternal life through him. If we are going to get to participate, we need to make some effort. We have to be a bit readier to engage than those who barely listen and drift away to their work, to their farms and businesses. Complacency and disinterest is the first failure.

The sort of effort we need to make will change how we look, first on the inside, and then on the outside to those looking with the eyes of God. As we engage with the Word of God in scripture and in prayer; in learning and doing God's work, so we change. We accept the invitation to love God through Jesus Christ, to follow him and in doing so, we are changed, or in the language of this parable, we become robed for the wedding.

The person who was not wearing a wedding robe had not accepted that invitation to the wedding in his heart, he may have wanted to for a fleeting moment but he had not made any movement or effort towards exploring what it might mean to be a guest of Christ's, invited to follow him. He did not enter in any part, at any point, into the spirit of it. He did not grow the bit of God in him. He did not try or desire to seek God and be clothed by him.

The final words of today's reading are chilling: *'For many are called, but few are chosen.'* But take heart, the invitation to follow Christ is thrown world wide: everyone is in that guest list; we can see from current statistics that proportionately few of the world are followers as yet. But when it comes to being chosen, okay, we are chosen first, that is the open invitation but we choose our response, we can choose to say 'yes'; we the good and the bad can all choose to say 'yes' and be changed by God's love.

If you are feeling gloomy and on thin ice at this point, turn back to the reading from Paul that was chosen to go alongside this. Paul was speaking to the Philippians who seem to have been experiencing a bit of a troubled moment themselves: Paul is urging Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. His tactic to restore unity and a confident way forward is to recall that church and those people to the charismatic joy of their first coming to faith. To recall the joy in following Christ, following with a right mind and a perfect trust in God.

Putting that into my language of today's sermon, I would be urging you to recall those times, those things that have made your faith bubble up in you, to let the bit of God that is the Kingdom of Heaven in you, expand upwards and outwards so it fills you. Then the transforming qualities of God's love in you will change you visibly on the outside, and change how you relate to others, the choices you make and the actions you take.

'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice ... and the God of peace will be with you.'

Remember that, and God will choose for you a gorgeous wedding outfit!

Amen