

In our Gospel reading (Matthew 22: 1 – 14), Jesus tells a parable about a wedding feast. Unfortunately, this wedding feast is not the usual tale of happy families being united by the love of 2 individuals. This is a story of a king, his son, some ungrateful invitees, murder, destruction of cities and a group of guests invited as an afterthought. And, as if that wasn't unusual enough, we then have the shocking end to the story. The king stands in front of all the guests and spots one who isn't dressed in his best bib and tucker. He then orders that the guest is bound hand and foot and cast out into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. It's a disturbing end to the story. So, I wonder what Jesus wants us to make of this parable and what is its relevance to us today?

As with all Bible stories, it is really important to understand the context. We have to remember that this parable, is the third in a series of parables, that Jesus tells when he is being questioned by the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Jesus uses the parables in an attempt to show them something of the kingdom of God, as opposed to the law-bound worldly kingdom that they inhabit.

In chapter 21, Matthew tells us that Jesus had been teaching in the temple following his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The chief priests, the elders, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, all those in authority in the temple felt threatened by this itinerant preacher. This rabbi, that a great crowd of people had recently exalted with hosannas and palm leaves. They interrupt his teaching and demand to know why he thinks he has the right to be preaching in the Holy temple of Jerusalem. Especially without their permission, and why he is stirring up the faithful and maybe even poaching their followers.

Jesus responds by saying (Ch 21:43) that 'the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruit'. Jesus intimates that they, the chief priests, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, will be like the original guests at the wedding banquet in his parable. They have been invited with all the pomp and ceremony of a royal wedding, but they are in danger of losing their place at the royal buffet. Despite being given the most important invitation of all, they have become indifferent, bound up in their own aggrandisement, too busy or too self-important to attend the event.

The king then sends out his servants to invite anyone who will come. Matthew tells us that this is an open invitation - given to anyone at all. But then the king spots someone in the crowd not wearing a special wedding garment. The person is not in his Sunday best. Despite the spontaneity of the invitation, the king takes this as a sign, that this person is oblivious to the significance of the invitation. They have not taken it seriously enough to dress up for.

So what was Jesus saying to the Pharisees and Sadducees? What is Jesus trying to say to us today with this slightly peculiar parable?

If we think about traditional biblical imagery, the king is often an allegory for God. If the king in the parable is God, then we can imagine that the wedding feast is the eternal banquet of heaven. Perhaps then, Jesus is telling them that the kingdom of

God would be taken away from those Jewish leaders. The ones who had been invited by God to be the leaders of the people of God. Those leaders who had become bound by the man-made extrapolation of the laws that Moses had brought down from God. The kingdom would be taken away from those who had forgotten their covenant with God, it would be given instead, to those who might not have their education or societal position, but who are close to God and living by following God's commandments. The kingdom will be given to the ones who are playing their part in bringing about the kingdom of God here on earth. The ones who are producing the fruits of the kingdom.

Jesus is telling them and us, that this invitation to the feast is an open invitation. All are invited to the feast, but there *is* a dress code. Paul reminds us of the dress code in his letter to the Ephesians (Ch 6: 14 – 17). We must put on the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes that make us ready to proclaim the gospel of peace, alongside the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. If we aren't prepared to observe the dress code, then we too will be shown the door.

So, what does this mean for us, here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

I wonder, is Jesus asking us to remember that the gates of the kingdom are open wide. Entrance is not based on education, background, popularity, ethnic or cultural origins. The people who are fit for the kingdom, are the ones dressed in the armour of God, and they may not be the ones that look most like us.

I wonder, is Jesus also telling us, that despite the gates of the kingdom being open to all, they still are gates. We too, must understand, that to enter them we must be ones who produce fruits of the Spirit, and be dressed in the right clothes. Paul again, in his letter to the Colossians (Ch 3: 12, 14) tells us that, 'As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony'.

Are we dressed for the occasion? And if we aren't yet dressed for the occasion, are we prepared to change ourselves and our lives to enable us to put on those clothes?

And finally, I wonder if Jesus is reminding us that the kingdom of God is like the most amazing party ever. That being close to God is a joyful thing. And if we live in a way that helps bring about the kingdom, then our hearts and lives will be filled with joy in a way that no earthly treasures could.

So I think our challenge for today is, do we recognize the invitation? Are we dressed in the right clothes? And are we prepared to be welcomed by the God of love, who says come, your seat is ready, you are my beloved guest.

**Amen**