

This morning we will focus primarily upon the gospel lesson, the beginning of St. Matthew 22, also found on page 217 of the Prayer Book. In this reading of one of Christ's parables, it is good to get behind the top-level story to understand its deeper meaning.

This particular parable is about a great king who invited his subjects to a feast in honor of his son's wedding. The king sent out messengers to proclaim that all was prepared, come celebrate. Perplexingly, those who were bidden would not come to the feast. So the king sent out other messengers who implored the invitees to come. The response? "But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise: and the remnant took his servants, and entreated them spitefully, and slew them."

Now, needless to say, the king was justifiably angry with how his subjects treated his servants and with the contempt they showed for his son. The result was that the king ordered his armies to destroy the murderers and their cities. Those who were bidden were not worthy of the honor bestowed upon them. But the feast was prepared. Guests must be furnished, and so the servants were sent out to call the outcasts of society to the feast. And they brought them in – both bad and good as the passage states.

What is going on here? Who are these various characters and what do they represent? Certainly we can make the connection that the great king is God the Father and the Son is therefore Christ. The marriage feast most directly connects with our weekly feast, the Holy Eucharist, in which we celebrate the redemption accomplished for us by Jesus Christ. But this feast should also be generalized outside of just our corporate worship. The feast is really the life that we, the redeemed of God, have in Jesus Christ. We will return to this theme later.

Who then are those who were initially bidden to the feast, to whom the king sent his servants and who ignored the invitation? We can understand these in two ways. The more obvious connection would be that they were God's special people who yet rejected Jesus Christ and the salvation He brought to the world. In other words, these are the Jews, and the servants who were mistreated and killed are the prophets. Most commentators point out that indeed, the Jewish people were decimated as described here, in 70 A.D. by the Roman armies during the siege of Jerusalem.

But this group of people who rejected the invitation can also be read through the lens of the proclamation of the Gospel throughout the history of the Church. The servants of God in this reading are those who preach the Word of God to the world, pastors, evangelists, and missionaries. It certainly seems that in our own time, most people ignore the proclamation of God's Word, and those who do not listen and who reject God will ultimately be rejected by

Him.

But why did the Jews not come to the feast? Why do people in our own time not come? The first issue is that their understanding is darkened. The Jews did not believe that Christ was the Messiah. And people in our own day find a myriad reasons why Jesus is not who He claims to be. They rationalize away any compelling evidence or arguments. But the bottom line remains, it is more rational to believe than to not believe. A century ago, modernity seemed to have faith on the run, but as time has progressed, modernity and now post-modernity have turned out to be houses of cards waiting to crash. Our excuses for rejecting faith will show themselves as the lies that we tell ourselves to avoid the Truth.

The second issue is that the people in the parable simply did not feel like coming to the feast. They did not consider it all that important. They had other things to do. "I would come, but I have to tend my farm. I would come, but I have to tend my store. I would come, but ..." Again, such excuses fall flat. They were morally lazy – it was too much effort for them to obey. Disobedience requires nothing of us. Obedience takes conscientious effort.

Do we not understand that it is God, as our Creator and Sustainer, who makes the rules? Therefore, we as God's creatures, must come when He calls. There are consequences for disobedience, both in time and in eternity. God is the King of All. He has all authority and power, and His edicts will be enacted as He wills.

Not that God is a tyrant. He created us in His Image as moral agents; we can make decisions to obey or to rebel. However, our rebellion, either active rebellion or passive laziness, will have its consequences.

What is completely irrational about the behavior of those who reject the invitation of Our Lord is that they were called to a celebration, a joyous feast. Why would they not come enjoy the bountiful food and drink? Why would they not participate in the festivities? Why would they not enjoy the company of friends and family and of the King Himself as well as of the King's Son? Life in the presence of the King is incomparably superior to anything else. It is true life—indeed, eternal life.

So was the wedding cancelled? By no means! The Son's union with his bride would be celebrated. Guests would be supplied. Since the originally invited guests were cut off, others had to be found. Were these necessarily the desirable guests? The rich and famous and popular people of the time? No. These were the rejects of society, the "broke, busted, and disgusted," as a friend of mine (Fr. Charles Myers) says. The servants gathered as many as could be found, "both bad and good," and the wedding was furnished with guests.

Now who do these guests represent? In the original sense, they are represented by the Gentiles. The Jewish people considered together had been cut off and the Gentiles had been brought in. Of course we see this in the history of the Church. Now the first generation of Christians were Jews, but once God revealed that one did not have to be Jewish to be a Christian, the gospel rapidly spread among the Gentiles and stagnated among the Jews.

In the contemporary sense, the new guests represent any who would accept the invitation of God to come to the feast, to be redeemed, and to be reunited with God in Christ. This celebration is open to any and all who will come. It does not matter what you have done. It does not matter who your parents were. It does not matter to God if you have ever stepped inside a church before, or if you understand everything just so, or if you are bound by sin. Life in God frees from sin. Deliverance might not happen immediately, but together we continue to work through our struggles. The big secret that no-one speaks aloud is that every person is a reject. The rich and famous and fabulous people are often the most broken of all. I hope that at least here we can be honest about it. The Church is made up of individuals who know that they have problems – that is why we turn to Jesus, because He will help us and eventually perfect us. This is why Church is a celebration – we know what Jesus has done for us and what we are becoming. Christians of all people should be joyous and celebrate life.

Yet the parable continues focusing upon a curious individual. In it, we have a man who does not have a wedding garment on. What are we to make of this fellow? He came in to the feast, but did not bother to wear the appropriate clothing. Now, first let us not presume that the guests must provide their own garments for all of them are poor and outcast people. Rather we know that the king of the parable provides the appropriate garments for his guests, just like it is God who dresses us in Christ's righteousness. John Calvin puts it this way:

the question is not as to the manner in which the garment is to be procured; for whomsoever the Lord invites he at the same time supplies with clothing, and in all of us is fulfilled what Ezekiel says, (16:6-14,) that God finds nothing in us but wretchedness, and nakedness, and abominable filth, but adorns us with magnificent attire. We know also, that there is no other way in which we are formed anew after the image of God, but by putting on Christ.¹

But the unattired man represents those who are happy to join in with worship or other

church activities, but who are more accurately characterized as consumers than worshippers. They are here for the community and fellowship, but they really don't want to pursue holiness and a deep relationship with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. These have not come to the understanding that attending church and being involved with religious activity are insufficient in themselves. It isn't about the externals, it is about love. The externals are good in themselves, but the target is still the heart. We desire to cultivate a heart that seeks after God. We desire to put on the righteousness of Christ so that in time, we become righteous.

The man who does not put on the wedding clothes symbolizes the people who attend church, maybe infrequently, maybe regularly, but who do not really want Jesus. They don't want to be inconvenienced by obedience. They don't prioritize the community of God, the Church. They participate in it solely for what they get out of it. They are not concerned with putting anything back in. They are not concerned for serving each other. They are not concerned with bringing others in. They reason within themselves, "Jesus, Church, these are great, I really enjoy them. But there is a big game on this morning." Or, "But I've got a trip planned. But I just got married. But I've got things I really must do. But this. But that. ... Jesus you are great, but just don't interfere with my agenda." The man who does not put on the wedding clothes wants the celebration without the commitment of love. He will end up with neither.

Of course, we are all on a journey. Some of us perhaps haven't yet realized that the wedding clothes are required. Some of us have put them on, but they are not really that comfortable. The collars are still chafing against our necks. Maybe some of us are bragging about how beautiful these wedding clothes are, while forgetting that they are entirely the gift of God so that we have nothing to brag about. We are all on a journey, the end of which is that we become as beautiful as the clothes we have been given; that we become the righteousness of Christ.

Part of this also is realizing that the work, the original inconvenience, of wearing these clothes leads us into the joy of the celebration of life with God. The wedding has already taken place, and we now are joyously celebrating and feasting. Do we have duties yet to fulfill? Yes. Do we have tasks and toil to face? Yes. Do we have responsibilities to God and to our brothers and sisters? Yes indeed. But still we frame our lives now as celebration. We have been saved, our connection to God has been restored in Christ, and we have all of the riches of God available to use as He sees fit to bring us to perfection.

Therefore, the challenge issued to us this morning is to live into the joy of our redemption. This is not an escapism or a denial of reality. We should not expect a life of walking closely with Christ to be easy. Christ suffered to obtain a greater glory, and therefore the followers of Christ will suffer also, but also to obtain greater glory. But the foundation of all that we are, of all that we say, and of all that we do, is the broken body, the shed blood, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ which has won for us redemption, righteousness, life. Will we accept this challenge? Will we rejoice in the salvation of God? Will we, as our collect states, cheerfully accomplish those things which God commandest?

This is summarized for us wonderfully in the epistle. In it, St. Paul admonishes those who follow Christ to turn from foolishness to pursue righteousness. We are to be characterized by care and thoughtfulness, not by excess or frivolity. We are to be as the man is in Psalm 1, walking not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standing in the way of sinners, nor sitting in the seat of the scornful, but our delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law we exercise ourselves day and night. And this really is the key today. We are called to a readiness this morning – a readiness to obey God. Yet this is not a readiness based on fear; we are the beloved of God, called as Christians, given His very Name, called to the feast. Ours is a readiness of joy, is of delighting in the Law of God. And in this joyful readiness, even time itself is redeemed and brought into the kingdom of God.

Yes, ours is a joyful calling, and we should strive to understand that joy, and to embody that joy,

being filled with the Spirit; speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in our hearts to the Lord; giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; submitting [ourselves] one to another in the fear of God.

We are indeed called to the feast. Let us approach His table with joy and gladness. Let us clothe ourselves with the garments of the righteousness of Christ. Let us always celebrate the blessed provision of the good things of God. For in responding to the invitation we discover that the king loves us and has made us more than guests. We are His beloved children, and very heirs of His kingdom. Do not turn away from the invitation this morning or in life. Rather let us come to the table, and rejoice, and feast.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.