

The wedding banquet

Sermon: **Pentecost 19**; 15 October 2017

Bible reading: [Matthew 22:1-14](#)

Introduction

‘The kingdom of heaven is like a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son’.

Among the many pictures Jesus gives us for the kingdom of heaven, this would have to be one of my favourites.

Because it shows us that, at its heart, to be under the reign and rule of God is *characterised* by joy and rejoicing. It’s a feast and a celebration. The kingdom of heaven is not like a funeral, it’s like a wedding banquet!

Having said that, weddings are not *always* happy memories for *everyone*. In fact, for some there is a lot of pain and sadness associated with weddings for one reason or another.

So it is in this parable, where the most joyful of kingdom pictures is among the most distressing of parables – violence and murder, the burning of cities, weeping and gnashing of teeth.

There are two sides to this wedding banquet.

So, let’s take closer look at it in its three stages:

- First the invitation refused,
- Second the guest list expanded,
- And finally, the dress code ignored.

The invitation refused

*‘The king sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they **would not come.**’ (v. 3)*

I wonder if you’ve ever had this sort of experience, where an invitation has been refused?

Perhaps especially when you thought someone was coming, you’d made lots of preparations, but then the friends or family cancel without any reasonable explanation. Perhaps it feels like they just got a better offer.

How much worse when it’s the King’s son? How much worse when it’s God almighty? So why do these people in the parable refuse?

At first, we could think they can’t come, that the invitation has been sprung on them and they have other plans. But it’s good to notice here that the slaves are sent to *‘call those who **had been** invited’*.

So this is *not* the first time they’ve heard about this. An initial invitation had gone out, perhaps like a ‘save the date’ in our day, and the implication is that there was an initial *acceptance*.

These people were on the guest list. But when the time came, they wouldn’t come.

And remember this is the King and his Son, so this is a very surprising refusal.

So much so that the king then sends other slaves with a *personal* message,

'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' (v. 4)

This also is quite extraordinary. Not only is the King giving them another chance, but he's almost begging and pleading with them – the King, remember!? Normal kings surely don't act like this!

It's almost as if he's assuming there's been some misunderstanding and he's even willing to lay out the menu in case that's a problem: *'Look guys, if you're worried this isn't going to be worth it, I've had the meat roasting on the spit for days, beautiful succulent top-quality cuts, the best wines from the cellar all ready to go: 'Come to the banquet!'*

But the refusal continues and gets worse.

'they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them.' (v. 5,6)

Two distinct ways of refusing.

Some respond with apathy and indifference; they are preoccupied with their day to day affairs.

They've got jobs to tend to on the farm; books to balance at the business. All good and important things, but when it's the wedding of the Son of the King, and you shrug your shoulders and act as if it's no big deal, something's gone drastically wrong.

The other group responds even more outrageously, in violence and rebellion – much like our friends the world's worst tenants in the parable last week.

Now in the first place this again seems to be about how God's people Israel treated the prophets, as God persistently and patiently sent them again and again.

But can't we also still see these two sorts of responses to God's invitation today?

When the gospel is proclaimed and God's invitation goes out, some people do get angry, and hostile. We're beginning to see more of this in our country I think.

But for the most part, people's response is this other way – just apathetic indifference.

In Christ God prepares, hosts and invites us to an eternal joyful feast with him, and yet we're tempted to think, *'Oh it's not that big a deal, I've got things to do, Maybe later...'*

This parable shows us the sheer madness of responding to God's invitation like that.

So how does the king respond?

'The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.' (v. 7)

There's been some surprises in the story so far, but this is the first really confronting part. The king responds in just judgment on those who rebel.

Now some see this as prophetic as it relates to the city of Jerusalem, others simply see this as a general way of describing the just judgment of God on persistent rebellion. Either way, it's a sobering warning from our Lord.

So that's the **invitation refused**.

The guest list expanded

Next, is the guest list expanded.

‘Then the king said 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.” Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. (v. 8–10)

You don’t want to see empty seats at a wedding banquet, do you? Or even with a special meal you’ve prepared in everyday life.

When those friends or family cancel you think, who else could we invite? Who might be up for a big roast dinner and desert and wine at short notice?

The feast is ready, let’s not let their refusal to come ruin it. Let’s find some more guests for the celebration.

This King will have his Son’s wedding banquet filled, God will fill his celebration halls; one way or another.

And when the A-listers refuse, he goes to the B-list, and the C, the D and E list.

In fact, notice:

‘invite everyone you find’, ‘both good and bad’.

Here is the picture of God’s radically gracious and indiscriminate invitation to *all* people.

You can see this happening in Jesus’ own ministry. The religious leaders refuse and reject him, but the tax collectors and prostitutes are gathered to him.

Then in the early church the nation of Israel continues to reject the Gospel message, and so the Gentiles are gathered in.

God’s invitation is spread far and wide, no matter where you are from, no matter your background, no matter social and economic status in society, God’s invitation to his wedding banquet is for all.

This is the guest list *expanded*.

Make no mistake, this is the reason we are here! We weren’t A-listers; we are the ones who were hanging around the main street missing out on the party before God reached out to us with his gracious invitation in Christ.

But this is also our **mission** as the Church.

The king says to his servant, ‘Go’ therefore into the main streets, and invite *everyone* you find. And Jesus will later say,

*‘Go therefore and make disciples of **all** nations ...’*

Lots of organisations have a target audience don’t they? They work out who’s most likely to buy their product or use their service, and they then know how should to shape the marketing and so on to best reach the target audience.

Sometimes the church can be tempted to adopt this sort of thinking: Who should we target who might then be able to benefit us in some way?

But when it comes to the kingdom of heaven, our boss has made it very clear that there is to be no target audience as such. We’re not to focus on a particular sort of person or group who we think would be nice to have in our church. The invitation goes out to all.

The guest list is **expanded**.

The dress code ignored

So the invitation refused, the guest list expanded, then finally we come to **dress code ignored**, which is for many people the most challenging part of this parable.

'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?" And he was speechless.

Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

For many are called, but few are chosen.' (v. 11–14)

Dress codes are important, aren't they? And for a wedding it's still customary nearly always to have the dress code listed on the invitation. 'Formal', 'smart casual', this sort of thing.

Generally, it's understood that it's a way of showing respect to the hosts, the bride and groom, and the other guests.

And we allow a certain amount of flexibility with this in our culture these days, but I think still for most of us, that if our son or daughter was getting married, we wouldn't be happy if our brother or friend showed up in a singlet, stubbies and thongs.

Dress codes matter.

So how does this work in the parable though?

Because, we might think, maybe this guy didn't have a wedding robe? Couldn't afford it! Or maybe he just forgot. Which then makes the reaction seems extreme.

Cast out into the darkness just for being a bit forgetful?

But I don't think that's what is going on here. An important detail in the text to notice, is that this man is singled out as **the only one** without this wedding garment.

The King's messengers invited all sorts of people they could find: good and bad, presumably rich and poor, those with lots of clothes and those with fewer, those who knew social etiquette and those who didn't, those with good memories and those with bad.

And yet there's only **one man** without the wedding garment. All the others were able to follow the dress code.

Maybe it's even because the King even provided the wedding garment with the invitation.

There are numerous other references in Bible where it talks about clothes being provided for people, especially in royal contexts.

So what's going on with this man is that at best he's refusing to come to the wedding banquet on the king's terms but wants to come on his own, and at worst he's actually refused what the King wanted to give him.

I think you see this too in the fact that the man is speechless when confronted.

He doesn't say 'I forgot' or 'I couldn't afford it', he knows immediately that he has no excuse in the presence of this king.

So what is the wedding garment though? Does it represent something in particular?

Is it love, or faith? Is it baptism, where we are 'clothed with Christ'? Is it righteousness as a gift from God like Isaiah talks about:

'I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.' (Isaiah 61:10-11)

Notice the wedding imagery there.

Think too of Revelation where those who stand before the throne in heaven in white robes, have

'washed those robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb'.

But then later on it also says,

*'for the fine linen is the **righteous deeds** of the saints.'* Rev 19:8

I'm not sure we have to choose between these all.

Being baptised, trusting in Christ, and the whole life which flows from this; it's all part of our proper attire before God.

Again, the basic picture seems to be that the person who wants to come into God's presence on their own terms – rather than God's – is excluded.

So the person who is baptised, but rejects their baptism, is this person.

The one who wants to be with God in heaven but thinks faith in Christ isn't necessary, is this person.

The one who refuses to listen and respond to how God calls them to live, is this person.

And to this man the judgment is as severe as it gets. Exclusion from the banquet, expulsion from the presence of the King and his Son, to that awful place of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

'Many are called, but few are chosen'.

In other words, the invitation is gracious and far reaching. It does go far and wide. But,

'the gate is also narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.'
Matthew 7:14

This is another sobering warning from Jesus to us today.

Conclusion

So the kingdom of heaven is like a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. We saw:

- the **invitation refused**,
- the **guest list expanded**,
- and the **dress code ignored**.

Today as you come to Holy Communion, you will hear an echo of those words of the king. *'Come, everything is ready'.*

Here the King is present as our host, here the Son gives himself to us, here we share in the joy of the wedding banquet, here we have a foretaste of the feast to come.

In the name of Jesus, Amen.

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