



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity St. Matthew 22:1-14 Fr. William Klock

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Jesus' words in our Gospel today can be difficult for many people. We too often build up an image of Jesus in our minds—and it's a false image—of a warm and fuzzy Saviour who throws a party and welcomes everyone. We latch onto the Jesus who speaks the words of John 3:17, "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." But we ignore the implications of that salvation. What did Jesus come to save the world from? Well, from the judgement to come, the judgement that will crush evil forever and wipe it from the face of his creation. Jesus is the Saviour who delivers the condemned who put their faith, their trust, their lives in him, but he's also the one who will one day set his creation to rights and pronounce judgement on those who insist on rebelling against him. Our Gospel today reminds us that Jesus is both the merciful Saviour and the righteous Judge. Here's what St. Matthew writes in Chapter 22:

And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast..." (Matthew 22:1-3a)

As modern people we're prone to missing what this is about. We read what Jesus says here and all we think of is a wedding. Maybe, as we imagine it in our heads, we try to flesh it out with details we think would be

part of a wedding in First Century Judea, but it's still "just a wedding". But for people living in First Century Judaea the wedding and the specific characters Jesus mentions were significant. They knew immediately that Jesus wasn't just talking about any old king or about any old wedding—or about any old guests, for that matter. Jews knew their Scriptures and they knew Jesus was drawing all of this imagery from them. It's the same for the parable Jesus had just told in the last chapter—the one we call the Parable of the Wicked Tenants.

It helps to look at that parable first. That parable was about a vineyard, carefully planted and cultivated by a man and then leased out to tenants while he went to a far country. When the harvest came he sent his servants to collect the produce, but the tenants decided to keep it for themselves. They beat, stoned, and even killed the servants who were sent by the man. Finally, Jesus said, the man sent his son. Surely the wicked tenants would respect his own son. But they kill him too, thinking that if the man had no heir, their theft of the vineyard would be all the more secure. But Jesus warned: When the owner of the vineyard does finally come back, he'll put to death the wicked tenants and lease the vineyard to tenants who will give him its produce. And it's at this point that Jesus says the words that are probably familiar to you: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." To us it may all be a little cryptic. But Matthew says that the priests and the Pharisees were furious. You see they knew exactly what Jesus was talking about. They understood the imagery. If you told a story about a man planting a vineyard, every Jew knew immediately that you were talking about the Lord establishing Israel—rescuing her from Egypt and settling her in the Promised Land, flowing with milk and honey. They understood that, just like the vineyard owner in the story, the Lord expected Israel to make something of what he had given her. He expected a

return on his investment, so to speak. Israel was supposed to bear good spiritual fruit. And they believed that's what they were doing. They hadn't always been very faithful. They knew that, the Pharisees especially, but they believed they were doing better. That's what the Pharisees were all about: modelling holiness and urging everyone in Israel to do it too. Then the Lord would come, judge Israel's enemies, and establish his kingdom. This is where our parable today picks up. Isaiah describes the Messianic kingdom in terms of a great banquet that the Lord would prepare for Israel after he judged and vanquished her enemies. As he once had rescued Israel from the Egyptians and led her into a land of milk and honey, he would once again rescue her from the Romans and usher in a golden messianic age.

Isaiah wrote:

**On this mountain the LORD of hosts
will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-
aged wine,
of rich food full of marrow, of aged
wine well refined.
And he will swallow up on this
mountain
the covering that is cast over all
peoples,
the veil that is spread over all
nations.
He will swallow up death forever;
and the Lord GOD will wipe away
tears from all faces,
and the reproach of his people he
will take away from all the earth,
for the LORD has spoken.
It will be said on that day,
"Behold, this is our God; we have
waited for him, that he might save
us.
This is the LORD; we have waited
for him;
let us be glad and rejoice in his
salvation." (Isaiah 25:6-9)**

This is what the people hoped for. This is what they expected the Messiah would bring to Israel. It's what Jesus was calling to mind when

he told a story about a king throwing a wedding feast. And it was a feast for the faithful of Israel. And this explains why the priests and Pharisees were so angry with Jesus. They were the ones who were supposed to be at that feast. In the imagery of the first parable, they saw themselves as the good tenants whom the Lord would reward, but Jesus is painting them as the bad guys. He takes the language they knew so well from Daniel about the stone—and they all knew that the stone represented the Messiah and his kingdom, the Messiah and kingdom they so longed for—and he says: Nope. I am the stone and you've rejected me. *You* are the wicked tenants. *You* are the ones who will be crushed by the stone.

Now he launches into this parable about a king and his banquet. The symbolism was clear. They were already fuming and they probably already had a good idea where Jesus was going with this. The king threw a banquet, he sent his servants to tell the invited guests it was time to come, but Jesus says:

...they would not come. (Matthew 25:3b)

Like the wicked tenants who refused to give the vineyard owner his due, the people invited to the wedding refuse to come. Jesus goes on in verses 4-6:

Again he sent other servants, saying, "Tell those who are invited, "See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast." But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them.

Do you see the similarities with the Parable of the Wicked Tenants? Different setting. Different imagery and symbolism from the Old

Testament. But it's the same plot, the same story. Israel's religious leaders, whether it was the corrupt Sadducees who controlled the temple and the priesthood or whether it was the other pressure groups—the Pharisees urging everyone to be more holy or the Zealots urging everyone to take up arms in open rebellion against Rome—they're all like these guests invited to the wedding feast. The King is throwing a party, but they've refused. They've got their excuses. One has a farm he has to take care of and another has his business. Luke recounts the same parable, but includes more details. In his version one man has just bought a bunch of oxen sight unseen and has to go check them over. Another just bought a large tract of land, again sight unseen and has to go look at it. Jesus is describing wealthy people here. The poor couldn't afford these sorts of things. And in Luke's version a third man bows out saying that he's just got married himself and can't come. Israel's King—that's the Lord and they knew this—he's throwing the banquet that Isaiah and the other prophets described, it's the banquet everyone's been anticipating, but now the guests of honour are refusing to come.

It might not seem like such a big deal to us. It's not that big of a deal to turn down a wedding invitation today, but in their world it was a big deal. It was a slap to the king's face. And an even bigger offense when we realise that what Jesus is saying here is that the king throwing the banquet is the God of Israel and that this banquet is big one, the great eschatological banquet, the one they've place their hopes in, the one where Israel celebrates with her God the day when he finally sets the world to rights. So Jesus is saying: It's here. And you've rejected the king's invitation. And you've rejected his son. And that's just what's been happening in Jesus' ministry. He began in Galilee, the area where he had grown up. The

people liked his miracles, but they didn't like his message. When he preached in the synagogue in Nazareth, his hometown, the people were so angry they tried to throw him off a cliff and stone him. At the point that he's telling these stories now he's travelled to Jerusalem—his final trip there—and now it's not just the hoi polloi in the country rejecting him, but the religious leaders—Jerusalem herself. And in rejecting Jesus, they're rejecting the Lord. He's sent his Messiah, but having seen him they don't want him. He's not doing and saying what they expected. He's not saying the things they want to hear, so they're going to get rid of him, just as their forefathers had got rid of the prophets the Lord had sent. But Jesus tells them that there are consequences. Verse 7:

The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

When Jesus said this it was easy to blow off. They didn't want to hear talk of judgement unless it was on their enemies, but this is just the problem. Everyone wants to claim God's promises, but few want to take up the responsibilities. Everyone want to hear about judgement when it's aimed at our enemies—and we so often just assume as these people did that God is on our side and that we're his friends—all those passages about his judgement are for other people, usually our enemies and the people we don't like. But what Jesus is saying to these people, these Jewish leaders and their followers, is that they've picked the wrong side. The Lord has been patient. He sent judges and kings and prophets. They refused to listen. They even killed some of them. And despite all that God's now sent his own Son to set the people right. This is their last chance. Reject the Son and there's no one else to send but the army that will come in judgement to wipe out the city. Consider that even still the Lord was patient for another

forty years. For another generation the apostles followed the judges, kings, and prophets and Jesus himself, calling Israel to repentance. The doors to the wedding feast were closing, but people could still get in. And then the judgement came. The Lord sent in the Romans, they burned the city, they tore the temple down, and they slaughtered the people.

But there was good news to be told to. It wasn't good news to the people who were originally invited. It wasn't good news to those left outside gnashing their teeth. But it is good news others. Look at verses 8-10:

Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.' And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests.

The Lord's banquet will not go unenjoyed or uneaten. The rich refused, so he sent the messengers to the poor and guests came in droves to fill the banquet hall. We don't have to read very far in any of the Gospels to see who came. The tax collectors came, the prostitutes came, the sick came, the blind came, the lame came, the lepers came, rough-and-tumble fisherman came, the nobodies came. Even a few Gentiles came—and that may have been the most scandalous of all. It turns out they'd been invited all along, but the messengers either hadn't bothered to tell them or the rich had convinced them that this banquet wasn't for them, but now they're amazed and joyful and overwhelmed with gladness to find out that the King desired their company.

Here's the picture of Jesus everyone really likes. In his love he's thrown the doors wide open. Everyone—*every-one*—is invited in. But so often we

twist it a bit to fit the false image of Jesus' we've created. We hear Jesus' come-as-you-are and whoever-you-are invitation, but we twist it to mean that Jesus is fine with us being in the banquet and staying just as we've come. God loves us just the way we are, we often say. And we usually say this sort of thing to justify certain types of behaviour. Sexual immorality is so commonplace and so acceptable in our culture now that it's tempting for churches to use this to justify turning a blind eye on it. If we tell people they need to stop sinning they'll leave, we think. Or we just use it as an excuse to conform to the values of the world. But, I've noticed, just as often it's an excuse we use to justify ourselves when our own sin is brought to our attention and when we're called to repent. It's just another way of saying, "Hey, don't you judge me!" It doesn't have to be sexual sin. It can be greed or gossip or bitterness or anger or a host of other sins we tolerate.

But consider, when the lepers and the blind came to Jesus' banquet Jesus didn't assure them they were just fine as they were. The whole reason they were there was because of his promise of deliverance and healing. When prostitutes and sinners came to Jesus he didn't say, "You're fine. God loves you. Each to his own." No. That just cheapens the love of God. That'd be no different than Jesus telling the leper, "God loves you just as you are" and then leaving him a leper. No, God's love is greater than that. Yes, God loves sinners and he loves them—he loves us—so much that he sent his own Son to die in our place and to rise to give us life. He loves us so much that he won't let us remain subject to the bondage of sin and death. As he healed the lepers so Jesus in his love calls to sinners: "Repent, be *transformed*, and enter the kingdom—enter the banquet. Experience creation, experience your humanity as God meant it to be from the beginning." God loves sinners

more than to leave them sinners. God loves sinners so much that he gave his Son to deliver sinners from our sin.

This explains the last part of the parable. Look at verses 11-14:

"But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. And he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."

This is the part everyone asks about. Wait? What? Why did Jesus throw the man out? Where did all these other people get their fancy wedding clothes at the last minute? Why doesn't this guy have them and how is that his fault? Again, this isn't the Jesus we've often become comfortable with.

But here's Jesus' point. The tax collectors and the prostitutes, the blind and lame, the lepers and the Gentiles—they didn't bring any fancy wedding clothes with them. Jesus gave them to them when they came. The wedding clothes we put on for the Lord's great banquet are things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control. They're the clothes St. Paul is talking about when he says to put off the old and put on the new. These are the clothes Paul's writing about, for example, in Colossians: "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" (Colossians 3:12). These are the clothes Paul is talking about in Romans when he writes, "But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh" (Romans 13:14).

Brothers and Sisters, these are the clothes—clothes of holiness and righteousness—that Jesus gives us himself so that we can enter the wedding feast. By his death he forgives our sins and by his resurrection he gives us a new life. In our baptism he strips off our filthy rags and pours the Spirit into us and clothes us with the beauty of holiness. The wedding garments are here at the font. Put them on, be transformed, be freed from sin and death, and join the feast. But if you refuse to put them on, you reject the King's Son, just as the priests and the scribes and the Pharisees did, just as the people of Nazareth did, just as Pilate and the crowds on Good Friday did. And judgement is coming. As it came on faithless Jerusalem it will come again on those who reject the King's invitation. That's the bad news. But the good news is that there is no condemnation for those who are in King Jesus, for those humble enough to turn aside from our old ways and to be delivered by Jesus and to be washed by his blood and clothes in garments of spotless white.

Brothers and Sisters, he offers a foretaste of his feast today as we come to his Table. He welcomes us here and he clothes us with holiness. Let us not only remember his love and his grace as we come this morning, but think too about the clothes you're wearing. Are you still wearing the wedding garments he gave you in your baptism?. As you come to the Table take an evaluation. Maybe you've exchanged the shirt Jesus gave you for the old one you used to wear. Maybe it's your socks or your tie. Maybe it's something as seemingly inconsequential as your shoelaces or your belt-buckle, but consider. Here again Jesus invites us to his banquet. Here again he's holding out the wedding garments again for us just in case we might have set a piece aside. Take it up and put it on, then come to taste and see the goodness of the Lord and have your hope renewed.

Let us pray: Gracious Jesus, thank you for inviting us into your Father's banquet. Thank you for stripping off our filthy rags, washing us clean, and clothing us in holiness so that we can enjoy the life of your kingdom. But we ask for grace. We ask for the grace to be faithful in living the new life you've given. Keep before us always and each day your love for us, the love that moved you to die on our behalf, keep that love ever before us that we might always desire to love you in return, to trust your goodness, to trust your faithfulness, to be obedient, and to keep these new clothes you've given us unstained. You've made us holy. In your grace and by your Spirit, keep us holy we now ask. Amen.