



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## The Twentieth Sunday after Trinity: Wedding Clothes St. Matthew 22:1-14 Fr. William Klock

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“The kingdom of heaven,” Jesus said, “is like a king who made a wedding feast for his son. He sent his servants to call the invited guests to the wedding, but they didn’t want to come.”

The Pharisees scowled. Jesus was on a roll. He had been ever since he’d ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey on Sunday with the crowds hailing him as the son of David—the Messiah. Then he went to the temple and not only yelled out an angry rebuke at the people working there, he started flipping tables and drove out the men selling the animals people needed for their sacrifices. It had brought the whole place to a stand-still. The next day he came back to the temple like he’d done nothing wrong. When the priests and elders confronted him, he told them a story about two sons. Their father sent them out to work in his vineyard. One of them at first told his father “No,” but after he’d thought about it, he eventually got to work. The other son cheerfully said he’d do the work, but never actually did it.

As soon as Jesus started the story, everyone knew what he was getting at. If you told a story in Israel about a vineyard and a father and his sons—those were all images from the scriptures—everyone knew the father is the Lord, the vineyard is his kingdom, and the sons are Israel. They recognised the imagery. They knew who was who. But they didn’t understand—or, really, they did, but Jesus wouldn’t possibly make that sort of accusation against the priests and elders. “Explain yourself,” they

demanded. And Jesus did. “You, the leaders of Israel, you’re the son who cheerfully said he’d do the father’s work, but never actually did it. The son who at first refused, but eventually came round and did his father’s work—he’s the tax collectors and prostitutes. Wise up. Those ‘sinners’ are the faithful sons going into the kingdom ahead of you!”

And then, just to make things even clearer, he told them another story. This is the one about man who planted a vineyard and then rented it out while he went on a long journey. At the harvest he sent his men to collect his produce, but the tenants refused. They beat and killed the servants. The man sent more of his men and the tenants killed them, too. Finally, the man sent his son. Surely the tenants would respect him. But, no. When they saw it was the son, they had even more wicked thoughts. “If we kill the man’s heir, then we can claim the vineyard for ourselves!” So they killed the man’s son.

“What do you think the vineyard owner will do?” Jesus asked. And with some trepidation—because they knew, it was obvious, that they were the tenants and Jesus was the son—they answered, “He’ll kill the wicked tenants and give the vineyard to someone else who will give him the harvest.” “That’s right,” Jesus said. They had to have known what was coming next. “God will take his kingdom from you and give it to a people who actually bear the fruit of the kingdom.” Even though they knew it was coming, the Pharisees couldn’t believe their ears. Over and over Jesus was condemning *them*—the leaders of Israel. And not just condemning them. He was threatening them with God’s judgement. *Them!* How dare he? They were the faithful ones. They were the ones devoted to the Lord. They were the ones devoted to the *torah*. And Jesus, this would-be Messiah did everything wrong. He healed on the sabbath, he offered forgiveness apart from the temple and

sacrifices, he ate with tax collectors and sinners. And he had the nerve to accuse them of unfaithfulness! It was like Jesus *wanted* trouble. They were furious. They wanted to have him arrested, but the crowds loved Jesus and there’s no way it could happen when they were around.

But Jesus just keeps on going with the stories. Again, today’s gospel from Matthew 22. “The kingdom of heaven,” Jesus said, “is like a king who made a wedding feast for his son. He sent his servants to call the invited guests to the wedding, but they didn’t want to come.”

Again, they knew who all the characters in the story were. The wedding feast and the great banquet were symbols from the prophets. The king was the Lord. The invited guests—that was Israel—especially Israel’s leaders.

Jesus was telling the story everyone in Israel longed to see happen in real life. As he had once rescued their ancestors from Egypt and led them into a land of milk and honey, so the Lord would one day rescue her from the Romans and usher in a golden messianic age. Isaiah had written:

**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 was the Lord’s promise to them. He’d done it in the past and he would do it again. They were sure of it. Because the Lord is faithful. And every year at Passover they ate the great meal that symbolised the renewal of his covenant with them. The Lord would do what he had promised. They looked forward to it with eager anticipation.

But Jesus doesn’t tell the story the way they told it. The king was indeed preparing the wedding feast for his son. And he was sending out the invitations. But as Jesus tells the story, the guests who were invited didn’t want to come. The Pharisees (and the priests and scribes and elders knew that meant them). And this was dumb, because they most certainly *did* want to come. In fact, they expected to sit in the places of honour because they had been faithful. But Jesus goes on:

“Again, he sent out other servants, with these instructions: ‘Say to the guests, Look, my banquet is ready, my bulls and fatted calves have been slaughtered, everything is prepared. Come to the wedding!’ But they ignored him. They went off. One went to his own farm and another went to see to his business. The others grabbed his slaves, abused them, and killed them.”

This was starting to sound just like the story about the vineyard!

“The king,” Jesus went on, “was angry and sent his army to destroy those murderers and to burn their city.” And they’re thinking, “Really, Jesus? The Lord is going to destroy us and burn down our city? That’s absurd. We’re his sons! We’re the ones who will stand by while the nations are judged and destroyed and burned. You’ve got it backward.” Jesus went on, “But

there were still no guests to celebrate the wedding of the king’s son. So the king said to his servants, ‘The wedding is ready, but the guests didn’t deserve it. Go to the roads leading out of town and invite everybody that you find to the wedding.’ So the servants went off into the streets and gathered together everyone they found, the bad and the good alike. And the wedding was filled. The tables were crowded with people reclining around them.”

This is what Israel knew was coming—eventually, someday, somehow, because the Lord had proved himself to be faithful—and most people expect that the Messiah would usher in that day. And here was Jesus, the one the people had hailed as Messiah on Sunday. He was the son, who’s wedding the feast honoured, but he was also the gatekeeper at the door. And the Pharisees and the scribes and the priests and the elders once again knew what he was getting at. Here was the Messiah—or at least a guy who claimed to be the Messiah—and yet they couldn’t brush off his claims too quickly, because so much of what he did really was Messiah stuff, and that had to really have them fuming—so here was the Messiah telling a story in which *they*, the leaders of Israel, were left out. Not only that, twice now Jesus had told stories in which the Lord had come in judgement on *them*—killing them and burning their city, Jerusalem. And now, instead of them feasting at the Lord’s banquet, it’s the rabble and the tax collectors and the prostitutes.

The Pharisees wouldn’t tolerate much more of this. A day or two later they finally decided to conspire to have Jesus arrested and executed. That, they thought, would prove whether he was the Messiah or not. When he was dead, that would prove they’d been right. That would prove his claims were false. Little did they know...

But in the meantime, Jesus wasn’t quite finished with his story. The

faithless leaders of Israel have been judged and executed, but there’s more. Back to the wedding feast. Picture all the people reclining around the table, feasting, laughing, singing, enjoying themselves and all dressed in their best, beautiful and handsome wedding clothes.

“So,” Jesus goes on, “the king looked out of the feast and saw all the people reclining at the tables and having a good time. He admired all their fancy clothes. It was a wonderful sight, but then the king frowned as he spotted a man—one man, over there—who wasn’t wearing the same beautiful wedding clothes as everyone else. The king got up and made his way through the feast to that man. ‘Friend,’ he said to the man, ‘how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ And the man was speechless.”

He knew he was in trouble. As much as this king was full of grace and rejoiced to see even sinners enjoying his feast, he’d also shown himself to be a stern judge. When the original guests refused him, he killed them and burned their city. He rejoiced to welcome sinners, but they had to put on their wedding clothes to belong. Jesus goes on, “Then the king said to the servants, ‘Bind him, hand and foot, and throw him into the darkness outside, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.’” And then Jesus simply ends his story with the explanation, “For many are called, but few are chosen.”

So the first part of Jesus’ story is pretty easy to understand, especially when we’ve just read the other stories he told to the leaders of Israel. The Messiah came to his people, he came to lead them into the Lord’s great feast, and the leaders of the people rejected him and now the Lord’s judgement is barrelling towards them like a freight train—or, more accurately, like—very much like—the Roman army. Instead, the king’s banquet is filled with the people no

one expected—with the common people who had never seen the inside of a palace and with sinners—the people no one would touch, people like tax collectors and prostitutes. Why? Because they were the ones who received Jesus as Messiah. Simple, ordinary people, nobodies, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, like Mary and Joseph, like Simeon and Anna, like the people who had gone out to hear John preaching in the wilderness and repented and who were baptised in the Jordan. And, too, people like Matthew and Zacchaeus, tax collectors who repented and believed that Jesus really was the Messiah who would usher in the kingdom, sinners who met Jesus, who heard the good news, and who decided that they wanted to be part of God’s new creation. That part of the story is pretty straightforward.

But what about the man without a wedding garment? The first part of the story was a warning for the unfaithful, the hypocritical leaders of Israel who rejected him. But this second part is a warning to those poor people, those ordinary people, those repentant tax collectors and prostitutes whom the Lord welcomed into his feast in the place of the leaders. It’s a warning that just because you made it into the feast, doesn’t mean the need for vigilance, for perseverance, for faithfulness is over.

In the final scenes of Revelation, John brings us back to this language of being called and chosen and to the imagery of the great wedding feast. Jesus’ people—the wedding guests—would find themselves in a time of tribulation. The leaders of Israel—and later the Greeks and Romans—would lash out at them, would pressure them to abandon Jesus. Eventually faithless Israel would be judged—destroyed and burned just as Jesus said—and later the Greek and Romans too—but would Jesus’ people stand firm for him and for his kingdom, would they keep proclaiming the good news in the meantime? Would they be dressed for

the wedding feast when it finally came? But what are those wedding clothes? Again, John helps with that. He describes the banquet in Revelation 19:

**Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out,  
“Hallelujah!  
For the Lord our God  
the Almighty reigns.  
Let us rejoice and exult  
and give him the glory,  
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,  
and his Bride has made herself ready;  
it was granted her to clothe herself  
with fine linen, bright and pure”—  
for the fine linen is the righteous  
deeds of the saints.**

**And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb”**

Notice that the bride is clothed in fine linen representing the righteous deed of the saints. Brothers and Sisters, when we are baptised into Jesus, he baptises us with his Spirit and his Spirit makes us new. The Spirit renews our minds and regenerates our hearts. He takes away our old desires for sin and for self, and sets our hearts on loving God and loving each other. In short, the Holy Spirit prepares us to be part of God’s new creation, to be part of the world finally set to rights. And while we wait for the consummation of that new creation, the Spirit makes us heralds of that kingdom. He fills us with God’s own life and causes us to bear the fruit that Jesus so struggled to find in Israel. And the Spirit enables us to persevere. And that, I think, is specifically what Jesus is getting at in his story about the man without a wedding garment.

Revelation shows us the banquet, but before we get there we see the saints,

filled with God’s Spirit, persevering as his witnesses—first in those decades between Jesus’ ascension and the judgement and destruction of Jerusalem, and then in the years leading up to the judgement of the pagan nations, of Greece and Rome. Jesus knew that his people would suffer as he had, that they would face the wrath, first of unbelieving Israel and then of the pagan nations, as they stood firm, as they proclaimed the good news that he was crucified, risen, and Lord. They would be tempted to give up. They would be tempted to compromise. But when the day came to usher his people into the banquet, Jesus would recognise his bride by her wedding clothes, by her perseverance and her righteous deeds. These are the clothes that the song in Revelation 19 says she was granted to clothe herself with—persecution, martyrdom, and Christ-like suffering.

And so the man without a wedding garment serves as a warning. Many would hear the good news, many would be baptised, many would be faithful followers of Jesus, even showing the fruit of the Spirit and doing all sorts of good works. But when tribulation came, when the pressure came, they failed to stand firm. They compromised or they forsook their Lord. They bowed to the pressure to be circumcised or they offered a pinch of incense to Caesar—there were and still are lots of ways to compromise our witness to Jesus and the gospel—and that’s just what they did. When the trials came, they took the easy way out rather than suffer for the sake of their Lord. When faced with martyrdom, they chose life today over the death that leads to life eternal. They were willing to follow Jesus as long as there was little or no sacrifice, but when they finally had to actually take up their crosses and follow him, they chose to walk away. They did not truly love their Lord with heart, soul, mind, and strength. They were not the people of the Spirit they claimed to be and were not fit for God’s new creation.

Again, I think Jesus' story and the part about the man without a wedding garment was aimed very specifically at the people of the fledgling church called to witness Jesus the Messiah in those violent decades between his ascension and the fall of Jerusalem, but it also serves more generally as a warning to us. I think of St. Paul, who shouted out those words in our Epistle just a few weeks ago: new creation! Brothers and Sisters, that's where Jesus is taking us. By his death he has forgiven our past, the past that has made a mess of this creation. In his resurrection he has unleashed new life and by plunging us into his Spirit, he has made us new, preparing us to take part in this world when he has finally set everything to rights. But in the meantime, he has called us and through his Spirit he has equipped us to be heralds of his new creation and of his good news. As I said last week, as he has united us with himself, Jesus calls us to share in his roles as prophet, priest, and king. And as it got him into trouble with the world, the flesh, and the devil, it will get us into trouble with the world, the flesh, and the devil. The more faithful we are, the more it will bring the scorn, rejection, and abuse of those who are invested in this old age that is passing away. The more faithful we are, the more likely they will be to lash out. It was Jesus' promise: As they have persecuted me, so they will persecute you. But we also have his promise if we stand firm—a promise of life, a promise to wipe away our tears, a promise of the age to come, a promise of life forever in the presence of the Lord. And like Israel of old, we are not left without tangible signs of the Lord's promise. Brothers and Sisters, remember your baptism by which you have been united with Jesus, by which your sins are forgiven, and by which you have been filled with God's own Spirit. And come to the Lord's Table and as you eat the bread and drink the wine, remember God's promise to us. Here he reminds us that we are his people, forgiven and made new at the

great cost of his own son's life. And here he gives a foretaste of that great feast and that new world that waits for us in that time when the church, because of her faithfulness, has finished her gospel work and when Jesus has put every last enemy under his feet.

Let's pray: Almighty and most merciful God, in your bountiful goodness keep us, we pray, from all things that may hurt us; that we, being ready both in body and soul, may cheerfully accomplish those things that you command; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*