



**Sermon for Trinity 21, 12th October 2008.
Matthew 22: 1- 14.**

The Church of England has just changed its policy on marriage in church. It used to be that one or other of the budding wedding couple had to either live in the parish or be on the electoral roll of the parish church in order to be married there. Three weeks ago that all changed: now couples may also marry in a parish church if either of them has been baptised or prepared for confirmation there, if either of their parents or grandparents were married there, or if they or their parents have either lived in the parish or habitually worshipped in the church for six months sometime in the dim and distant past! If that has confused you; and it certainly confused me the first time I read it; if you have access to the internet, all is explained on the brand new website: www.yourchurchwedding.org

That's good news for couples wanting to be married in church; not, I must admit, entirely good news for vicars of pretty churches – like Holy Trinity Northwood, for whom the number of weddings that they take may well increase dramatically in the coming years.

Weddings are big business in our society. Every year the hotel down the road from church has a Wedding Fair over a weekend; and every year on the following Monday morning my phone is hot with couples who have noticed “what a nice church there is just up the road from our reception venue” – can they hire it – one couple even wanted to know if they could hire me - and on hearing this, my heart, I must confess, doesn't always leap for joy.

Weddings were just as much big business in first century Palestine, and that Jesus knew well. Remember his first miracle, in John 2 where Jesus is the guest at a Wedding at Cana. The wine runs out and he changes 180 gallons of water into wine in a miracle full of symbolic overtones. With that amount to drink the party could have gone on for about a week; and indeed in that culture they did. Jesus knew how important Weddings were – hence his many uses of Wedding Feasts - bridegrooms, bridesmaids and so on, in illustrations about the Kingdom of God, not least the parable in our Gospel reading today.

But there are one or two rather disturbing features to that passage; thank you James for inviting me to preach on quite such a tricky passage! It requires a bit of unpacking, before we go home with the wrong idea of just who this Jesus might be, talking like that.

The parable unfolds in three acts: firstly, not one, but two calls to the proper guests to come to the party; secondly, as the proper guests would not come, a call to the outcasts to come to the party instead; and finally, a rather odd confrontation and nasty expulsion from the wedding feast.

The marriage feast in this parable represents the messianic banquet, the Kingdom of God. The master, God, sends his slaves, the prophets, to call his guests. The invitation is a free act of kindness, God is not obliged to invite, but he does out of his generosity and love. And all is ready – there is a sense of urgency – the word 'ready' is found three times in this passage; but the invited guests make light of it, they deny the urgency, they are careless about the things of God. They do not realise that the Kingdom of God is ready, here and now, and they don't care.

The master is furious; the next verse reads 'the king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city'. This is a reference to the Roman capture

of Jerusalem in AD70, and to the original readers of Matthew's Gospel who would have just lived through that, it would have been a powerful reminder of what happens if you take lightly the important things of God.

The invited guests are not found to be worthy, they've not shown an appropriate moral and spiritual response, they are not ready and don't care. So the king instead sends his slaves out onto the streets, or as another translation puts it – to the 'road outlets' – the gates and markets of an oriental city, where the crowds swarm with the outcasts of Israel. The sort of people that you wouldn't want at your wedding reception. But the slaves were sent out to bring them in, to bring in the crowds, and fill the wedding hall. And so we are reminded strongly that the Kingdom of God, which this wedding feast represents, is very much a mixed bag of saints and sinners!

But then comes the strangest part of the parable. The king arrives and notices that one of the guests is not wearing a wedding garment. And at first reading – we may well ask, well why should he? He's just been dragged in from the highways and byways to a wedding, of course he's not going to be wearing a wedding robe. What sort of an unjust king is this?

St Augustine in his commentary on this passage gives us a helpful way of looking at it. He suggests that the wedding robe is symbolic. It represents a converted life, full of good deeds. He suggests that this garment is the one essential for the Kingdom of heaven: love. Sinners are invited to the feast, but are expected to repent, and that repentance must be continued in a life of love and compassion. When we fall short of this, we risk, as the parable concludes, being bound and thrown into outer darkness, because we will have failed to clothe ourselves in the garment of love.

'For many are called, few are chosen'. There is a distinction between the initial call and final election. We are warned against complacency. It is not enough to say we were called, that we were saved, it is through our living out of our calling – being a Christian, living a Christian life, that we will be chosen, and the latter is not automatic.

So as we look at this parable 20 centuries later, who are we? We are the ones who have been brought in from the highways and byways – the invited guests have already failed to show up. It is not often that we in the Church of England put ourselves in that position, as the outcasts or outsiders! We are the sinners who have been brought into the wedding feast. Each of us in our own faith journey knows how and when that process of being drawn into the community of faith began – at Baptism, confirmation, some other time. And the question that is asked of is in fact the same question that it asked the original readers: are we suitably dressed for this Wedding banquet. Not in terms of what we are physically wearing, but are we wearing the garment of love?

Sunday by Sunday by Sunday we are called in from the highways and byways of our lives into this banquet, this Eucharist; each time acknowledging our sinfulness, yet receiving through God's grace, the feast – the bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ. And slowly but surely we are clothed with the garment of love, and our lives radiate the love and compassion of God.

A wedding has to be well planned, prepared for, and organised with love – and we in the Church of England look forward to being part of many more in the future. The feast of the Kingdom of God is not so different; are we ready, are we playing our part, are we prepared, are we wearing the garland of God's love in our lives? We have a foretaste of the Kingdom in this Eucharist, let us feast on it, and let us allow ourselves to be drawn in to the love of God, that we, and many, may not only be called, but chosen. Amen.