

Parable Sermon: The Wedding Feast  
Matthew 22 v1-14  
Ephesians 2 v11-22

It seems incredibly tough doesn't it? The poor chap who isn't wearing a wedding robe is dealt with most severely and today's window captures it all. Like two of the windows we've already studied it is a window of contrasts – glance over to the over side of church and you can see the others : the Pharisee and the tax collector, Dives and Lazarus.

This window is divided into 2 vertically – the left hand side - light, right hand side- dark On the left we see the King clearly identified by his crown, the one hosting the wedding feast for his son. In the background, figures attending the feast ; maybe guests, maybe servants. The King has his hand in the air issuing a command and the words of the command surround the window, “Take him away and caste him into outer darkness.”

And the “him” is on the dark side of the window. Grabbed by the hair by an “attendant” – other versions of the bible say “servant” and our friends Heaton, Butler and Bayne (stained-glass window makers) have dressed the servant doing the throwing out in what looks like military garb. In the background stands a further attendant with sword drawn in case of any arguments. And the poor chap himself – well his garment doesn't look too bad to me – is in no position to argue with his hands tied behind his back and his head forced low. I'm not sure what these things are between his legs – they look like a spare shoe of the unhappy chap being taken away and the man evicting him. Not that either of them have a shoe missing! Very odd – though on holiday in Cornwall we did find a stained glass window where the Good Samaritan had two left feet (and the church of St Nicholas, West Looe had this pointed out in the town trail!).

But why such harsh treatment of this poor chap? We're told that quite a few of the guests had been literally dragged off the streets to make up the numbers so surely, the King didn't expect these people to have had time to get on their best bibs and tuckers before joining the celebrations?

But was this man one of the men dragged in off the street at the very last minute? Well, we don't know that he was! The Bible doesn't make it explicit. What it does say is "The king came in to see the guests and noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe and he said to him, "Friend" - and that is an interesting greeting from a King ..... so maybe this man was one of the King's inner circle and not a last minute "invitee". "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless.

The man uttered no defence – presumably because there was no defence that could he uttered. Perhaps if there had

been, someone else who have spoken up on his behalf but the King's question was met with silence. Oops – he had been caught out well and proper. Well, what would your defence have been?

This parable makes more sense if we know something of a couple of Jewish rabbinic parables which would have been well-known to Jesus listeners. The first indeed told of a King who invited his friends to a feast but didn't say quite when it would be. However, they were told to wash, anoint and clothe themselves ready for the summons, when it came. The wise did as the King suggested but the foolish thought the feast would take a long time to prepared so potter went to his clay, the smith to his furnace, etc – they got on with their work. The summons came with no further warning and the wise were ready and sat down and enjoyed the feast, but the foolish, who had no time to change had to stand outside. They were not prepared for the summons of the King – or as the parable was chiefly understood – for the summons of God.

In another rabbinic parable the King entrusted his royal robes to his servants. What would you do if the King lent you his robes? If you were wise you would store them carefully and keep them pristine. If you were foolish you might want to show them off, even wear them to work. But what when the day came and the King wanted them back. Would you be handing them back in all their loveliness or would they be stained and soiled? If the latter, the story went, the robes were handed to the fuller to cleanse and the servant cast into prison. What, we may ask ourselves, has the King given us in trust and in what state is it today, this very day should the King call us to account?

So within our parable today we have messages about preparedness, trust and respect.

At the time of its telling by Jesus, it was probably directed against those Jews who weren't prepared to accept that

Jesus was the King's, God's Son. They were the ones invited to the wedding feast but who made light of the invitation and went away, one to his farm, another to his business. Note they weren't doing bad, evil things, they were getting on with their work. Maybe they needed to go on a work-life balance course!

But then there were those who seized the king's slaves and maltreated them, even killed them. The king got his revenge by sending in the troops and destroying them and burning their cities. Maybe this is why our attendant in the picture, throwing out the man, has a hint of the military about his outfit. By the time this parable was actually written down, both Jews and Christians were facing the Roman quelling of their restless and unruly citizens – perhaps there is a bit of scape-goating being put onto Jesus' lips by the person writing the parable up quite a few years later.

Anyway, back to the wedding feast – it wasn't looking as though the party was going to be going with a swing with quite a few empty seats. So the servants are commanded to go out and invite “everyone you find” to the wedding banquet. This was the strongest hint yet, by Jesus, that the kingdom of heaven (and remember the parable begins..... the kingdom of heaven is like this.....) has an open door. Gentiles and Jews are all welcome. St Paul puts it much more explicitly in our first reading from Ephesians, (Eph 2 v13 But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Jesus v18..... for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer stranger and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.

So the slaves went out into the street and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

But some of the Jewish members of the early church struggled with the idea that the Gentiles could just come in, just like that ..... and the parable we are considering comes from Matthew's gospel which is thought to have been written for a fairly Jewish audience.

Some have argued that the part of the parable we have in our window today is a separate parable, a separate occasion from the wedding feast in which guests were pulled in off the street. And let's face it, Matthew's gospel, more so than any of the other gospels, tends to group events and sayings, thematically rather than chronologically so maybe the author has just pulled together several “wedding” stories which Jesus told on different occasions in different contexts.

But there again, the author could have juxtaposed what may have been 2 separate parables very deliberately to make the point that, Yes, the door of the Kingdom of Heaven is open to all but there is a bit more to it than

that. All who enter need to clothe themselves in the values of the kingdom. One can't just continue in ones old clothes. The invitation to the wedding banquet does require more than just turning up and tucking in. Even if we aren't wearing our best wedding outfits, is our inner beauty up to meeting the wedding feast of the King's son?

So a final look at our window? Virtually all the parables beg the question "Where are we in it (today)?" There are quite a few possibilities.....

the King issuing the commands and the judgements,  
the attendants throwing out the unworthy,  
the disrespectful friend of the king being thrown out,  
or one of the shadowy background figures, perhaps guests  
or servants

or perhaps, outside the frame of the picture, the guests  
who turned down the invitation and are back at work  
or the guests who have been ready and waiting for a long  
time and now rejoicing or those just pulled in off the street  
stunned to be in such company?

Quite a lot of choices. Who do you identify with most of all now, this moment? And are you happy with that or do you want to change your garments, your position?

Remember ALL are invited to the wedding of the King's Son. I know the cry goes up every Saturday night all round Banbury, "I've nothing to wear?" But is it really true?

References:

The Parables of the Kingdom by C.H. Dodd

Interpreting the Parables by A.M. Hunter

The Gospel of Matthew (Daily Study Bible) by W  
Barclay.