

Dressed for Dinner – Mt 22:1-14

I love this time of year! We are definitely in Fall – bright white clouds in cobalt blue skies, snappy crisp air, trees clothed in riotous colours – what a wondrous time of year! I’ve caught on that Fall is truly here, and I’ve even caught on that this weekend is Thanksgiving. It’s not only the red and orange and yellow leaves and seeing my breath to feel like it’s Thanksgiving time – it’s the carefully controlled chaos in the kitchen at home as Elizabeth prepares another huge Thanksgiving Dinner. My favourite memories of Thanksgiving (and my favourite anticipations of tomorrow!) always seem to center on food and feasting: the smell of a huge turkey roasting in an oven, pots full of potatoes and squash and peas, pies spread out to cool all over the place.

And so when I began to look at today’s reading from Matthew, the parable of the marriage feast, my mouth waters and I dream of drumsticks and gravy and mashed potatoes and pumpkin pie – yum!. Sadly, the parable itself doesn’t go into much detail about the food at that banquet, and while I could claim, “that’s OK, a feast is a feast”, it’s not OK if we want to understand what message the text has for us. Perhaps you’ve noticed how my Thanksgiving Dinner frame of mind colours my impression of this parable, leading me to put an emphasis on it that isn’t necessarily what was meant in the original telling. But you know, we all do that to some extent, we all hear and read stories through the filters of our own experiences and our own interests. And we’re not alone in that – the gospel writers did the same thing. Heard and retold the stories through their own filters of interest and experience as well. You only have to take a look at the differences between Luke’s and Matthew’s telling of this parable to see each has coloured the parable with their own emphases. (Verse 14 sure looks like a typical Matthew proverb, concluding the story but not really connecting with the meaning.)

You may recognize that this story, the Parable of the Wedding Banquet, is strikingly similar to the Parable of the Tough Tenants that we saw last week. That’s not too surprising when we recognize that along with the Parable of the Two Sons Matthew selected these three stories to highlight Jesus’ response to being challenged by the chief priests and the elders in the temple. These officials came to Jesus while he was teaching in the temple, and asked him by what authority he was doing “these things” – I should think so, especially concerning him overturning tables and driving the money-changers out of the temple! Jesus responded not only by cornering them with a question about John the Baptist but went on to twist their noses with these three parables.

Today’s reading the parable of the Wedding Banquet, like the Parable of the Tough Tenants, also describes waves of servants being sent out, being mistreated and even being killed. Severe punishment occurs in response, others are called in, and a particular kind of behaviour is then expected of the replacements. Both of these parables conform to historical events: Israel’s mistreatment of the prophets; Israel’s rejection of the early Christian evangelists; the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD; and even the movement in the early church from a Jewish to a Gentile constituency. All of these ‘apparent’ connections with historical events of course assume that we recognize that the story is being seen and used by Matthew as an allegory; that is a story in which the meaning lies outside the story in those persons and events to which it refers. I don’t think we have much choice in doing so, because some of the elements of the story cause it to be less than life-like, and force us to look for a larger interpretation or meaning. Probably the best example of this is the part where troops are dispatched to execute guests and burn

down the city while dinner waits. Talk about your extended family dinner that has gone totally bad – this one sounds way worse even than going to the in-laws for Thanksgiving!

Now I can recall Thanksgiving Dinners that were delayed a few minutes for one reason or another, but I can't imagine even Elizabeth trying to keep the meal warm while several platoons of soldiers set out to raze a city or even a city block. These unreal elements of the story clearly signal that we are to look for a larger meaning, to recognize that the people and the events in the story represent and point to selected people and events in history. Here it is abundantly clear that the parable talks not about a literal banquet and guests, but of God, the kingdom, Jews, Gentiles and the demands of kingdom life. The whole story calls attention to the final judgment, and providing the ultimate answer to Jesus' challengers as to the source of not only his but all authority, namely from God. This is a story about the end of all things, about the final judgment, about what was and is really important in the kingdom, and thus in the lives of those who would live in the kingdom.

What then does this parable tell us is important? What is the basis upon which that final judgment will be made? It is not simply whether one says 'yes' or 'no' to the invitation. That final invitation is most gracious – all are invited, both bad and good. But just because all are invited it does not mean that there are no standards, no expectations of the guests. At the very least, a suitable wedding garment is required.

But what exactly does that reference to the oh-so-crucial wedding robes mean? I think it's safe to say it's not a reference to actual clothes – recall what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: "Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? ... see how the lilies of the field grow, they do not labour or spin." Or about John the Baptist, "what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes" No, those who wear fine clothes are in king's palaces."

I think it's fairly clear if we look at the imagery used in the New Testament, in particular Paul's writings, we can understand the wedding garment is kingdom talk for new life, righteous conduct. From Romans, "Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature." Here again we have that struggle so common not only throughout the New Testament but throughout the history of the church: the tug-of-war between grace and permissiveness.

That struggle to understand the tension between grace, the open invitation from God to all, and permissiveness, the ability to do whatever we please, is as old as our recognition that God exists. The pendulum has swung back and forth over the ages between the extremes of seeing God as being a harsh and forbidding judge who sets the bar of righteous behaviour so high that nobody can cross it, and of seeing God as having no standards at all and accepting any kind of behaviour. Is there a 'right' spot on that scale? How can we find it? What does it mean for us to be 'dressed for dinner' at the final banquet in the kingdom? Are we to live our lives in fear and trembling, consumed with worry that we will be ejected from the banquet if our earrings are a tad too long, or the bow tie on our tux is crooked? Will a spot of lint be enough to have us hauled away from the table? Can we get away with a borrowed or rented tux (since it's the final banquet there's no need to return it!)? Will it be OK even if our garment is old, and a bit shiny from wear, and even stitched and repaired in places? Will we be ejected if our garment is a bit too trendy? Or the wrong colour? Or too tight? Or too loose? Or the feather boa doesn't match?

These are serious questions, because they have a parallel in the modes and forms of the righteous behaviour represented by the garment required for the banquet. We can accept that we are expected to behave in the kingdom with righteous behaviour – but what exactly does that ‘righteous’ mean? What is the threshold? What kind of behaviour is considered to be under-dressed for dinner? These are difficult questions, without simple or simplistic answers. It has always been too easy for the church, and people in the church have often been too eager to develop a strict dinner dress code, a set of rules defining righteous behaviour that are so constricting, so stifling as to make movement while wearing them impossible. Even Matthew, who here emphasizes the need for ‘suitable’ behaviour elsewhere in his gospel goes to great lengths to also emphasize how Jesus tackled those who would bury people under a monstrous clothes-pile of rules of righteousness.

So, how to decide what to wear? What wedding garment, what cloak of righteousness is suitable to the one who told the parable in the first place? What is the definition of righteousness not in Matthew’s terms, not in the terms of those who would streak the banquet, not in the terms of the scribes and Pharisees, but in Jesus’ terms? What, according to Jesus, was the ultimate definition of righteous behaviour?

Once we pose the question that way, the answer comes a little clearer, doesn’t it? Paul addresses the question in Galatians, “for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” If we look at Jesus’ answer to that very question about the definition of righteousness, when he was asked by the Pharisees which of the rules (commandments) was the most important, Jesus replied, “they’re all pretty good, but I’ll give you another rule that encompasses all of the scriptures – love God with all that you are, with all your heart and mind and soul; and love one another as God has loved you.” Now there’s a pattern from which to cut the cloth of our lives.

Perhaps a verse from Colossians says it best, “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” Love God with all that you are. Give to God all praise and thanksgiving for His involvement in your life, showering you with a cornucopia of blessings: food, shelter, friends, family, the very opportunity and invitation to gather at this table in this corner of the banquet hall. Give to God all praise and thanksgiving for the freedom to choose, through which there is meaning. Give to God all praise and thanksgiving for the strength and patience and love to deal with others in the dining hall. Give to God all praise and thanksgiving for the gifts of healing from wounds of all sorts – physical, mental, emotional, spiritual. Return to God all the love with which he has filled you.

Love each other, as God has loved you. How to do that? How to make that love a warm blanket of acceptance instead of a hard glove of dismissal? Jesus’ instructions on how to do this were as clear as glass as well. Feed the hungry. Offer drink to the thirsty. Welcome the stranger. Tend and heal the sick. Visit the lonely and the prisoners. Clothe the naked. These are the acts of righteousness that are woven into the wedding garment to be worn at the final banquet. To those who wear such garments the Lord will truly say, “come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”.

The feast is prepared. It’s time to get dressed for dinner. Put on the clothes of righteousness, the garments woven in love from the fleece of the Lamb, Christ our Lord.