

## Matthew 22:1-14 Sermon

This morning we are still working through Jesus's stories told in response to the rejection of his authority by the key religious and political leaders. A couple of weeks ago, it was an explicit questioning of his authority that brought the issue to the surface, and last week, Jesus told a story of bad tenants in a vineyard as judgement upon these religious leaders. This week is similarly judgemental, but there's also a distinct twist in the tail.

Also like last week where Jesus told an allegorical tale of Israel's religious history in miniature, this week we have a similar tale: a tale which condemns the rejection of the prophets by Israel's leaders after God had laid on a wedding banquet complete with everything needed, just except for guests. In this tale the King sends messengers repeatedly to invite people to his banquet, promising them an amazing time, and repeatedly they refuse to come; even to the point of inexplicably mistreating the messengers.

In response to the rejection, those invited will be destroyed. There's a reference to burned cities potentially alluding to the destruction of Jerusalem in around 70AD. Just like the story last week, the king replaces the guests with different ones - he scrounges the streets for the good and the bad to fill the hall with guests. Until this point, the story is pretty much the same as last week.

However, then we get to scene two of the story. We're at the banquet and the king comes in and notices a guest who isn't wearing a wedding robe. This man is punished by being cast out into the darkness. Nowadays we'd be tempted to think of this as cruel episode – perhaps the man didn't have a robe if he'd just been invited in off the street? The king, we might think, is abusing his authority and acting with no sympathy for the man's plight and potential poverty.

But this isn't the reality. All one was required to do to go to a wedding in Jesus's day was to simply make sure your clothes were clean. To not even bother to do that was a cultural insult – anyone can wash their clothes and therefore it seems instead that the banquet meant so little to the man that he just didn't care. This is why he was speechless when challenged by the king. He didn't have an excuse. He could have said that he didn't have the appropriate attire if it was indeed a difficult thing, but actually he had been caught in his slovenly ingratitude and lack of respect. The king had laid on the perfect party, and the man couldn't even be bothered to do the minimum of social niceties in response. Instead, the man is a freeloader, turning up for the meat and booze but without any consideration of the host, just assuming he'll be lost in the crowd and his disrespect won't be noticed.

How can I respond to this story?

The important things to note, I think, are that the King – God – repeatedly invites people to his feast. He pleads. He promises that it will be worth it. It isn't a one-time offer. Even when spurned, God invites and persuades people to come into his banquet. This is the God that we serve, not some judgemental pedant who tries to catch us out all the time.

Secondly, we might notice that when the King invites people in from the streets, he gathers the good and the bad. All are invited. There is no-one who is excluded because of their past moral history. The people who are deemed not worthy are those who rejected the invitation rather than those who are morally 'bad.' None of us are unworthy of place in God's Kingdom because of our history. We are all invited.

Thirdly, the man who didn't bother to dress for the banquet - who presented himself at the feast in all his dirt and carelessness - he accepted the invitation but perhaps because it was given freely, he didn't value it enough to act with even the minimal amount of respect, decorum or social conscience. For us, as Christians, the lesson is fairly clear. Just because the invitation to God's feast is free, doesn't mean it's worthless. Jesus talks at length elsewhere of the cost of following him, but perhaps here we are less concerned with 'taking up our cross' and more concerned with turning up to the heavenly banquet not covered in filth. Our Christian lives don't make us worthy of the invitation to God's Kingdom, but deciding to accept the invitation and then just carrying on living as if nothing has changed is clearly incompatible with being God's guest. God doesn't require perfection, but he requires that his guests make the effort appropriate to their decision to come. This sting in the tail of this story brings us all up short. Do we take the free gift of being God's people and treat it with contempt, or do we practice being people worthy of being at the wedding banquet now?

The final verse is an example of Jewish wordplay. All are invited, but not all will be at the feast. God is sovereign, but we cannot turn up in rags either.

So where are we, each of us, in this story?

Have we accepted God's free invitation which is open to all, good or bad? Have we let God plead with us to come to him or have we just tried to become deaf to it?

If we have accepted, do we then just find ourselves turning up in stained clothes – turning up covered in the rubbish that we bring into our lives and those around us? Perhaps we are too busy to wash – too busy to bother praying to God, too busy to make God a priority in our lives? Perhaps we are addicted to the same sinful thing over and over again? Perhaps we just don't really value God in our lives and plan to just trundle through until we reach the threshold of the banqueting hall before panicking about our attire? Do we risk just paying lip service to God, trying to get away with God impacting on our lives in the most minimal way we can? How would that look if we were asked by God?

Wherever we find ourselves within Jesus's story, please pray about it. Everyone is invited to an amazing feast, but accepting the invitation isn't just skin deep, but it makes demands on us too. Of course, the story says that it is worth it – the feast will be fantastic. Life in God's kingdom is good. May we all accept the invitation and come appropriately prepared. Amen.