

Sermon for Year A Proper 23

The Text: Matthew 22:1-14

Grace and peace to you from Father, Jesus, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen.

Weddings in Jesus' day were different than they are today. Guests didn't wear their best clothes, they wore a wedding garment supplied by the host. Guests didn't bring gifts for the couple. It was a great honour to be invited to be an invited guest at a marriage celebration.

In the parable that Jesus tells us today there is a wedding. The groom is the son of a king. The heir to the throne is marrying. This is a once-in-a-generation event. The king is overjoyed and he plans a grand celebration to share his joy.

The king spares no expense in preparing the wedding feast. He has prepared both oxen and calves and everything else needed to complete a generous feast. You can imagine the kind of a spread a king would put on for the wedding of his son. The tables are laid out with the finest cutlery and linen. Flowers and decorations fill the wedding hall. Musicians stood by waiting to entertain the guests with songs of love and joy and the blessings of marriage. The wedding supper is ready.

The king spared no expense in sending out the invitations. He didn't post written invitations. He sent his servants out to the guests to give them a personal invite to the wedding celebration. Each guest heard the words of the king himself spoken by the servant, conveying his joy at his son's marriage and his desire for that guest to come and be part of the festivities.

The king makes every effort to make his happiness known. Who wouldn't want to be part of this royal wedding feast? Lots of people. In fact, everyone rejected the king's invitation. No doubt they had their excuses—it was too far to travel, one had to plant his crop, another was painting the lounge room, still another had to do their taxes. You know the kind of excuses one uses to avoid accepting an unwanted invitation.

But the generosity of the king could not be stopped. He overlooks the indifference of the guests and sends his servants out to the same people again. He really wants these people at the celebration. More excuses were given, and some responded with violence, beating the servants and killing others. The goodness and generosity of the king was answered with murder.

The king is stunned. He is bewildered that his generosity has been met with indifference and violence. And so, the king judges them and they are punished to the full extent of his authority. But what about the feast and the wedding festivities? Who will receive the king's generosity and know his joy? Who shall eat at his table?

The king opens his heart wider, sending the servants out to invite whoever they find. He doesn't care who it is as long as they can eat and drink and join in the festivities. The king just wants to give. The servants go out and the wedding hall was filled with guests. There was the local shoe maker along with the old guy who lived on his own and shuffled along with his walking frame. One servant brought his mother from the nursing home and all

the other residents came as well. There was the homeless young man who lived in the sand dunes on the edge of town and the young mother raising three children on her own. There was the poor farming couple with a dozen children. They could hardly believe it. What had they done that the king should invite them to feast at his place, to celebrate his son's wedding? Nothing. But that is the kind of king this is. His generosity knows no limits. He wants to give. He wants others to share in and know his joy.

As the guests arrive, they put on the king's wedding garments. Whoever they were out in the world did not matter, in the wedding hall everyone was an honoured guest. The hall was full of guests. The king was happy. His gifts were received with eagerness and joy. As the king rejoiced with the guests, mingling with his new friends, he noticed one fellow who was not wearing the wedding garment he supplied. He was wearing his own clothes and had somehow got past the servants and the guards. Curious, the king asked this fellow how it was that he was not wearing a wedding garment. The king did not want this fellow to miss out.

The man did not reply. He gave no reason and offered no apology. He just looked at the king with one of those looks: "aren't my clothes good enough for his highness."

The king was stunned that the gift of royal wedding clothes had been rejected. He just wanted to give and to bless. This man wanted to be at the celebration, but not as a guest. He didn't want to be seen as a guest. He wanted to be known as someone who deserved to be there. He wanted to be there on his own terms, on the basis of his own worthiness and identity. The king had him removed. The wedding hall was for those who rejoiced at receiving the king's generous gifts.

And that, dear friends, is what Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like.

Two things stand out in this parable.

First, is the immense generosity of the king, of our heavenly Father.

Second, is the mind-boggling rejection of the Father and His gifts.

But this does not stop the Father from sending out His invitation again and again. He will not be stopped from sharing His joy and the riches of His kingdom. He wants the undeserving, which is all of us, to be His honoured guests and friends. When faced with rejection, He goes to others so that all people would know His generosity and come to His feast.

The Lord's servant Isaiah, writes that the feast on the mountain of God is for everyone. At the heavenly feast there is a place for every person, regardless of where they have come from or what they have done. The King wants to give.

Then there are those who want to be at God's feast on their own terms. They think they are good enough in their own clothes, that they deserve to be there, that they are doing God a favour coming in their own dress. But this is a rejection of God's garments. It is denial of our unworthiness.

God simply wants to give. He has no ulterior motives. He doesn't want to get anything out of us. Many who reject God's offer of grace and love think He demands something from us and

so they have their excuses, they have reasons for thinking that God should accept them just the way they.

But really, what do you and I have that God the King needs? What could we offer the King who has everything and who graciously shares it all with us? We don't deserve it, but the Father loves to give. He wants you, with Him in His kingdom so you can receive everything good things you need.

To make that possible the Father gave His Son, the Bridegroom. Jesus gave His life for His Church, the bride, that she would be spotless and without blemish. On Calvary's cross He took on our sins and He was cast into the darkness of death, that all our unworthiness would no longer be counted against us.

Then in Baptism you were washed clean and the robe of righteousness washed in the blood of the Lamb was laid on you and you entered God's kingdom, wearing the royal wedding garments. Your own clothes were sin-stained rags. The Lord gives you new clothes, bright and radiant with His own holiness. None of us can come to God on our own terms, we come by His invitation, we come covered in the forgiveness and righteousness of Christ.

And here in the Church there is a little feast for you—in the Lord's Supper—which is a foretaste of the never ending heavenly feast to come. Again, we don't deserve it, we come as invited guests to eat the holy food and drink the holy drink. This meal keeps and sustains us in the forgiveness and faith God gives. We are all sinners with nothing to give God but our sins, but we come at His invitation to receive the life-giving gifts of God's grace and mercy. We are all guests, all robed in Christ, all coming at the Saviour's call to eat and drink the holy meal He prepares for us.

There is no room at this feast for thoughts that I am better than others at the table, or to take what is laid before you lightly, or think that I deserve His righteousness because I'm sinning less than I used to, or to think of God as a demanding boss and not a gracious King.

If that's you—and it is all of us at some time—repent and change your thinking. Jesus told this parable to change the way we think, so that we realise how generous He is, how wide is His love, how complete is His salvation to embrace all people; that God's invitation is for you.

So, come and rejoice in the Lord always. Rejoice that you are covered in the robe of Jesus' righteousness. Rejoice that you are invited into the Father's presence. Rejoice that forgiveness is free and here for you. Rejoice that He is overjoyed that you are here. Rejoice that you live. Rejoice that God has granted you the gift of faith in the Word and promises of God.

Rejoice in the Lord always and come to Him often to receive His good gifts of forgiveness and life and salvation. It's all the gift of God and it's all for you. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.