Sermon: Trinity 18A St Matthew 22:1-14

If you have ever been invited to a wedding you will know how important etiquette and preparation are. Invitations must be sent out well in advance with a clear indication of timings; menu choices and dietary requirements must be returned; suitable gifts and clothing have to be purchased…the list goes on and the number of spreadsheets each couple has increases annually!

But it wasn’t like this at the time of Jesus. Back then, invitations to important weddings were more like announcements that the marriage would take place at some point in the future; neither the date nor the time were clearly specified for very practical reasons. Only once the bridal party had gathered all the food, wine, musicians, and everything else that was needed, only then the wedding celebrations could go ahead. Only once everything was ready the household servants would go out to round up the guests. And if you had been put on the spot by the sudden call to attend the party, you didn’t have to worry; even suitable wedding garments would have been provided.

So if you had been invited, all you had to do was turn up. A bit haphazard, you might think, but in the days before clocks, professional wedding organisers, and legal registration this worked pretty well, even when the wedding was not an ordinary one. This is a marriage celebration organised by the king; a party that would have lasted at least a week. The closest thing we could compare it to nowadays would be being invited to Buckingham Palace for a week-long lively programme of state dinners with food, entertainment, clothes, and accommodation all provided. Imagine that.

And it is in this cultural context that Jesus places today’s parable. A story in which the King is God the Father, his son is Jesus himself, and the servants are the prophets of old – some of whom had been maltreated and even killed. The original guests – the ones, who though invited, backed away from God’s invitation to be his holy nation – are an illustration of Israel’s religious elite. To them Jesus contrasts the new guests, gathered from the most unlikely of places; from crossroads. These are the gentiles, the non-Jewish people, us; the ones to whom God willingly extends his call to become his holy people. The wedding garments, which are so crucial in order to be admitted to the feast, are a representation of the habits of faith and love we must practice. And finally, the celebration itself is an image both of the eternal life which we hope to enjoy, and of holiness which we are called to live in the present.

So in reading this parable, what does the call to holiness look like?

First, we can say that God’s call is open to everyone. Even if so many people turn his offer down, God keeps inviting.

Secondly, we can say that God’s call is a free gift. There is no charge, fee, or hoops that we have to jump through in order to be called to become saints. We do not need to be able to prove ourselves worthy of it, because God’s invitation is, and always will be, there.

And lastly, we can say that the call to holiness is essentially a call to joy; an invitation and a cause for celebration. For too long saints, holy people, and faithful Christians have been seen as killjoys, but the parable of the wedding feast essentially says, **“God calls you to joy now, and to celebration in the life to come.”**The only thing we have to do is to clothe ourselves in the wedding garments of faith and good deeds which God provides for us.

As unoriginal as it may sound to us now, the meaning of this parable was ground-breaking for Jesus’ original listeners; everyone is invited to the wedding feast – not just one nation or type of people; each one of us, as the parable says ‘bad and good alike’, is called to become a saint. Ahead of our APCM in a moment, I am thankful for the people who have heard this invitation and responded, and have turned-up – people who have not heard the message before and yet have made our churches their home. I am thankful for the change of demographic we seen in the make-up of our congregation because of the welcome we give when people join us. I am thankful for our doors being open every day (bar lockdown) and the way anyone can walk in and spend time with God in the serenity of this place. There is a lot for us to be thankful for, but there is also a lot more to be done. We are the servants charged with ferrying the invitation to come and celebrate. I wonder how often we actually share this message? If we each invited one other person to join us in worship, and they accepted that invitation our churches would be full each week.

Perhaps we would do well to rediscover this meaning, our role as servants, and our joy in the invitation entrusted to us.