

**Call to Worship**

As we begin our worship these words are for thinking today: Praise the Lord! Let us give thanks to the Lord, for he is good and his steadfast love endures forever. May we never forget the Lord our God but seek after God's justice that we may know his glory. Let us worship the Lord!

**Hymn CH4 510 – Jesus calls us here to meet him**

**Prayer of Adoration & Praise**

We clear our heads, we still our hearts and we come before God in prayer, let us pray.

Lord God, you invite one and all, so here we are. You make space for us whoever and wherever we are. May we feel your welcome and extend that same grace to others.

Wherever we have been, whatever brings us to this act of worship, may we experience encounter with you, O living God, and may that encounter transform our lives. However unlikely it may seem, may encounter with you transform our despair into hope, our fear into joy and our loss into new beginnings.

Here, may we know ourselves seen and heard by the living God, loved as we are and made new by the intimacy of relationship. Forgive what we have been, renew what we shall be and take us from here inspired to serve you in the world. Keep on working in us and through us until we extend our reach and our arms in welcome and you are worshipped as you ought to be in every corner of the world.

For all this we ask in Jesus' name, who taught us when we pray together to say; Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive others that sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and

deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

### **Reading: Matthew 22: 1 - 14 (taken from The Good News Translation)**

#### **The Parable of the Wedding Feast**

**22** Jesus again used parables in talking to the people. <sup>2</sup> “The Kingdom of heaven is like this. Once there was a king who prepared a wedding feast for his son. <sup>3</sup> He sent his servants to tell the invited guests to come to the feast, but they did not want to come. <sup>4</sup> So he sent other servants with this message for the guests: ‘My feast is ready now; my steers and prize calves have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast!’ <sup>5</sup> But the invited guests paid no attention and went about their business: one went to his farm, another to his store, <sup>6</sup> while others grabbed the servants, beat them, and killed them.

<sup>7</sup> The king was very angry; so he sent his soldiers, who killed those murderers and burned down their city. <sup>8</sup> Then he called his servants and said to them, ‘My wedding feast is ready, but the people I invited did not deserve it. <sup>9</sup> Now go to the main streets and invite to the feast as many people as you find.’ <sup>10</sup> So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, good and bad alike; and the wedding hall was filled with people.

<sup>11</sup> “The king went in to look at the guests and saw a man who was not wearing wedding clothes. <sup>12</sup> ‘Friend, how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ the king asked him. But the man said nothing. <sup>13</sup> Then the king told the servants, ‘Tie him up hand and foot, and throw him outside in the dark. There he will cry and gnash his teeth.’”

<sup>14</sup> And Jesus concluded, “Many are invited, but few are chosen.”

**Hymn CH4 533 – Will you come and follow me,**

### **Sermon – ‘Called & Chosen: God’s Invitation’**

When we read the Parables of Jesus, it could be argued that, it is often a good idea to read them, first of all as a story, and not to jump too quickly into asking what the meaning behind the Parable actually is.

This morning’s Parable is one in which the main character is a king. A king was an unusual choice for Jesus when telling a parable. Much more often, Jesus has a householder or a landowner as the main character. The character who, in a certain sense, represents God. Stories about householders and landowners were closer to the familiar life of Jesus’ listeners, but in this case, we find Jesus talking about a king because this is very much a story about political affairs.

The king’s son is to be married and the king is planning the wedding feast. The marriage of the son and heir is obviously a great occasion of state. A festal occasion of enormous importance and with, obviously, major political resonances. For the great men of the kingdom, invited to the banquet, this is an occasion not only to demonstrate their loyalty to the king, but also to pledge allegiance to his son, to guarantee (as it were) the succession of the throne.

That means, that when they ignore the invitation, they are making a political statement. They also know, very well, what they are doing. Notice, they offer no apologies or excuses. They do not even respond with formal politeness.

Evidently, they are not willing to give their loyalty to their king’s son. When some of them, invited a second time – that is given a second chance to show their allegiance – kill the king’s servants. This is open and unequivocal rebellion. So, the king does what kings do about rebellion: he sends his troops to destroy

the rebels and to raze to the ground the rebel cities that they governed. *“My wedding feast is ready, but the people I invited did not deserve it,”* says the king in verse 8. The people he had invited, people that one would expect to be present at such an occasion, had treated his invitation with contempt. They have proved themselves unworthy of it. However, the king cannot cancel the wedding feast. This is his son’s wedding; it must be celebrated; there must be guests to fill the banqueting hall. Yet, where can worthy guests be found? Guests who will not spurn the invitation but be glad to be there and really share the joy of this wonderful occasion with the king?

This is the question that the rest of this Parable is about. Who will prove worthy to be a guest at the wedding feast? The king decides that he will offer an indiscriminate invitation to all and sundry. The servants go out into the city streets – the obvious places to find a lot of people – and invite everybody they see. All sorts of people. *“Good and bad alike”*, the Parable says. Anyone is welcome, everyone can come.

But, of course, everyone that comes has to dress properly for such an occasion. That meant, wearing a longer garment than the one you wore for working and it also had to be a garment that was as close to the colour white as you could get. For, white was the colour of celebration, but it was also expensive. Only rich people could afford cloth that was sparkling white.

Yet, everyone could wear a clean garment, that was as near to white as they could get. Poorer people, who possessed only one garment, would borrow a festive garment for a special occasion. Or, sometimes, they had the hem of a garment stitched up to make it short for ordinary use, but could let it down to

make it longer for festive use. If you are going to a party and expect to enjoy yourself, you take some trouble to figure out what you are going to wear.

So, the king is surprised to see someone there wearing his “everyday” clothes. The king’s question – *“Friend, how did you get in here without wedding clothes?”* – is not yet a condemnation, but a real question. He is giving the man the chance to explain if there has been some misunderstanding or special circumstance.

However, the man cannot explain himself. What was he thinking of when he came to a wedding without wearing a suitable garment? It is puzzling and the Parable means us to be puzzled. What is clear is that he has not taken the occasion seriously, as the special party that it is. He is, both, dishonouring the king and the occasion.

He is rejecting the king’s invitation just as surely as the great men originally invited had done. They had refused the invitation; he had accepted it – ostensibly – but now treats it with contempt whilst actually attending the feast. In effect, he has not really accepted the invitation, since the invitation was not just to be physically present, but to participate in the king’s rejoicing over the marriage of his son. The other guests show their participation in the occasion by wearing their party clothes. This man, who cannot be bothered to do that, is not a real guest.

The end of the story is a little odd. It is only to be expected that the king will order that the man be thrown out of the hall. Yet, the way the king puts it, is extravagant: *“Tie him up hand and foot and throw him outside in the dark. There he will cry and grind his teeth.”* Right at the conclusion here, you see, the story

stops being realistic. This is not what would have literally happened in the world of the story.

It is the language of God's judgement on those excluded from the Kingdom of God. Jesus often uses such language, so the meaning is very clear. The effect is to jolt hearers or readers of the story, who have followed it just as a story, as we have – the effect is to jolt us readers into sudden awareness that the story is saying something rather important.

Who is worthy of attending God's great celebration of His Kingdom? Not necessarily the big and important people – I mean "big and important" by the standards of this world. The people you may expect to be invited, if God cared anything about which people are thought to be important in the world's affairs and judgements.

All too often, such people do not even bother to reply to the invitation. They have too much invested in the ways of this world. They are altogether too content with what they are getting out of the system of this world to be interested in signing up to God's alternative Kingdom.

It is not necessarily the big and important people who are worthy to attend God's great celebration of His Kingdom. For everyone is invited. All sorts of people. Good and bad. You do not have to be a good person to get God's invitation. Jesus himself delivered that invitation by mixing with the most dubious characters and the most "looked down upon" people, in the society, of His time. Everyone has a chance to be fit for the King.

You do not have to qualify at all to get God's invitation. That is Grace, and, as I have often said, we do not take God's Grace seriously enough. What God did in and through Jesus, was to fling open the gates of His banqueting hall, to anyone at all who wants to come to share His joy and to pledge their allegiance to His Kingdom.

All that is required is a real willingness to accept the invitation, to really honour the occasion, to really rejoice with the King. All that is required is a real recognition of what it is that God invites us to. Not to bother to change into party clothes, just to come in off the streets in our everyday clothes, as though this were nothing different from our evening meal at home – of course we cannot do that.

Earlier, I said the Parable intends us to be puzzled about the man without the wedding garment. Why did he accept the invitation, but not do the obvious thing that accepting the invitation required of him? It was not a difficult thing to do and he can offer no explanation for it.

It seems absurd behaviour – and the point is that it is absurd behaviour to be invited to God's great banquet, to accept the invitation, but to go on, as though nothing out of the ordinary was happening. Not to let God's invitation affect our lives. Not to see that accepting God's invitation is the most important and most wonderful thing that has ever happened, or could ever happen, to us. Absurd.

It is like going to a house where a party is in full flow and ignoring it. You go into the house and do what you would normally do – cook your dinner, take a bath,

get down to some work in the study, watch some television. You could not complain about being left out of the party, since you are the one who has ignored it. What an absurd thing to do, says the Parable, when what you are missing out on is God's greatest party.

So, I want to finish by asking you, how do you respond to God's invitation? Is it a shrug of the shoulders? Do you walk off in the other direction? Are you distracted by other people or other tasks? Or is your response: 'yes' – a yes that is more than just a word, but a new attitude of heart, mind and soul as you give your life to God? That is the question each one of us needs to know how to answer. Not later, when it may be too late – but now.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**Hymn CH4 251 – I, the Lord of sea and sky,**

**Prayer for Ourselves and Others**

We unite our hearts again in prayer, let us pray.

Inclusive God, why is your world so divided? Why are we so binary?

Good or evil, black or white, male or female, rich or poor, young or old, we seem incapable of seeing the whole colourful spectrum that you created and each of us as created in your image.

We have a compulsion to label and to categorise, to separate and demonise. Anything that saves us having to own one another as family and justifies us withholding all that we feel we have earned.

And while we are busy hoarding, your children continue to suffer and we are too busy to notice far less make a difference.



Lord give us wider arms and bigger hearts and greater understanding to know that sharing what we have will not diminish us. You bless us so that we might bless others.

So as we pray for wars to end, may we refuse to invest in all that causes destruction.

As we pray for homes for the homeless and food for the hungry may we be willing to share the space and the wealth that we hold tightly.

Prise open our hands and our hearts, to care and share freely. Heal the blindness that prevents us from seeing and our muteness that prevents us from speaking out against injustice wherever it is found and give us wisdom to know how to change things for good and how to empower others to enable change too. Inclusive God, inspire us to be inclusive too. Amen.

**Hymn CH4 511 – Thy hand, O God, hath guided,**

**Benediction**

Each time we meet God throws a party. He is glad we came, delighted we made the effort. You are God's special guests. Remember this as we leave our time together. God the Creator, Jesus the Son, the Spirit our guide, makes time for us each and every day. And may the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with you and all whom you love, this day and forever more. Amen.