

## The Wedding Garment



This is simply an awful parable in today's Gospel, and one which I simply cannot ignore. For what we have here is the horrific tale of a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. The appointed wedding guests refused to come, even seizing and killing those slaves who merely brought the invitation. The king became so enraged that he sent out his troops, murdered the appointed guests, and burned their city to the ground. The king then invited in others to the feast, from the highways and the byways, in order to fill the wedding hall prepared for the celebration. Then upon entering the hall, the king notices one guest there, who does not have on the proper wedding garment, so that guest is seized and bound hand and foot by the king's

attendants and thrown out into the outer darkness, where he weeps and gnashes his teeth. --- Whew! This is a terrible story! I can't believe it is in the liturgy to be read on a Sunday morning. Where is the good news in a parable like this? What is Jesus trying to tell us here?

Because one should inevitably ask, how could the poor man have been expected to have on the proper wedding garment if he had just been hauled in unexpectedly from the streets to attend this wedding to which he had not previously been invited? The king in this parable is ruthless, mean-spirited, and downright cruel. The parable is also unrealistically and uncharacteristically violent. For it seems unreal that the appointed guests, no matter how much they did not want to attend this wedding, would have actually seized the slaves who brought the invitation and killed them; or that the king would become so enraged because his friends refused to attend the wedding of his son, that he would send out his troops to kill them, and then as if that was not enough, to burn down their city to the ground. Jesus' parables are usually much more realistic and true-to-life than this. And yet I have heard many a bad sermon try to explain this story as it stands and to justify the actions of this king as we find them here. That I simply cannot do. I feel bound to make some sense of this story for us all.

And upon a more careful examination of the Scriptures, the problem here, it seems to me, lies not with the words of Jesus, but with the writings of St. Matthew. For today's Gospel reading, I believe, forms not one parable, but two; and we will grasp Jesus' real meaning far more easily and far more fully, if we look at them separately.

The first parable, the parable of the great banquet, is a well-known story of Jesus. It appears independently elsewhere in both the Gospel of Luke (chapter 14.16-24) and in the Gospel of Thomas (logion 64), and both times it appears without any mention of the man lacking a wedding garment. This would then be a simple parable about a man who prepared a great banquet, but when the invitations went out to his appointed guests, they, for a variety of reasons, refused or were unable to attend. So, the man sent his servants out to invite others instead to come to the banquet prepared. In Luke's version of the story, the servants are first instructed by their master to invite the poor and the maimed and the blind and the lame, and when the banquet hall is still not full, then to go out onto the highways and byways and actually compel people to come in to the feast. This parable, like others of Jesus, reflects the participation in the kingdom of heaven of the outcasts of society, of sinners and tax-collectors and prostitutes, who are going into the kingdom

of God ahead of the scribes and Pharisees who have refused God's invitation.

But even so, Matthew's version of the parable of the great banquet is different from the others. For Matthew has altered and allegorized the story a bit, as he has done elsewhere, making the father in this parable, for instance, now a king and having the appointed guests not only decline the invitations as they do in the Gospels of Luke and Thomas, but to actually seize and kill the slaves we brought the invitations --- similar to last week's parable of the wicked tenants, where the tenants killed the messengers from the landowner who came to collect his share of the produce, and then even killed his son. This addition to the story is suggestive of how the Jewish authorities had stoned the prophets and crucified Jesus. Then the enraged king's army kills those invited, and burns down their city. This is suggestive of how the Romans soldiers put down the Jewish revolt of 70 A.D. and utterly destroyed the great city of Jerusalem, taking it down stone by stone and massacring thousands upon thousands. Those violent additions in Matthew's Gospel clearly reflect how the author himself is trying to make sense of the violent death of Jesus, and the tragedy of the Jews refusing the Christian message, and the Romans destroying the great city of Jerusalem. Those details are helpful clues in dating the writing of Matthew's Gospel to

sometime after 70 A.D., but these additions to the story distract us from Jesus' original parable of God's mercy and forgiveness, which extends not only to the chosen ones, but even unto the sinners and outcasts of society.

The second half of today's Gospel is, scholars think, a separate parable about a man without a wedding garment. There are numerous such rabbinic parables about kings and garments, and it would appear that this story stands in a long line with them, reminding the hearers of their responsibility towards God. Gods' grace is not a free gift, for it also requires a serious response on our part. A person cannot go on living the life that one lived before, after one accepts God's invitation. We must change, and the clothes we wear are a fit symbol for that kind of change.

As an original story of Jesus, this second parable of the man without a wedding garment, would be an exhortation to be ready in the face of the coming kingdom of God, like many other of Jesus' parables about being ready when the master calls, or when the bridegroom arrives, or even when the thief breaks in during the middle of the night. Be prepared is the message here again. In this story, the invitation appears to have come sooner than some had expected, and it caught the man without a wedding garment unprepared, like the foolish virgins without enough oil, or the unwise householder of another parable who had no bread

for a midnight caller. Woe to the individuals in such cases, says this parable! Get ready, for the kingdom of God is at hand, says Jesus!

Now Matthew altered the first part of the story, I think, to make it clear that the Jewish authorities rejected Jesus, rejected God's invitation to be a part of the kingdom of heaven, and that Jerusalem was destroyed in Matthew's mind at least because that Jewish rejection outraged God. God thus then invited foreigners and outcasts, the tax collectors, and the Gentiles, to the heavenly banquet in their place. Matthew may then have attached the second parable about the king and the man without a wedding garment as a warning to these new Gentiles converts about their admission to the Church on too easy of terms. One may not have to become a Jew, one may not have to be circumcised, for instance, but one does have to refrain from certain things, like eating animals sacrificed to pagan gods, one has to change how one lives one's life in some way or another in becoming a Christian; one needs to have a wedding garment to show this change.

But because of Matthew's alterations to the original story and because of his combining of these two parables for his own polemic purposes, the hearer of this Gospel today sometimes can miss out on the actual messages of Jesus, that God's love and mercy is wide and accepting, beyond the strict keepers of the

law and the commandments, beyond the Pharisees and the scribes, beyond the righteous and religious people of his day. Therefore, we too must be prepared to answer when the invitation comes to us, the invitation to be part of the kingdom of God. We must not be caught unready, sleeping when the thief comes in the middle of the night, or like the foolish virgins without sufficient oil when the bridegroom suddenly arrives, or more particularly, like the man caught without a wedding garment when the final invitation is received.

God loves and accepts us, Jesus says, and we must be willing to be changed by that love. So then, have our lives changed by our accepting God's invitation? Is our life different because we are Christians from others around us who are not? And if so, how? Would our neighbors be able to identify the difference? In the end, have we put on our 'wedding garment'? Are we living the life we are meant to live? Are we really prepared to receive the invitation to come to banquet prepared for us from the foundation of the world? Or not? That is the question. AMEN