

The Best Invitation

MATTHEW 22:1-14 — Revd Guy Martin-Scott



22 And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, ² “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, ³ and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. ⁴ Again he sent other servants, saying, ‘Tell those who are invited, See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.’ ⁵ But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶ while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. ⁷ The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. ⁸ Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹ Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.’ ¹⁰ And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests.

¹¹ “But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. ¹² And he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. ¹³ Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Matthew 22:1-14 (ESVUK)

Time to Celebrate

I wonder what is the best event that you have ever been invited to? Perhaps it was a particularly special birthday party, or a New Year's Eve bash which someone famous attended, it might have even been an invitation to attend a talk by a celebrated author that you admire.

The best event I have ever been invited to was when I completed my Gold Duke of Edinburgh award. I received an invitation to go to St James' Palace in London and meet the man after which the award was named. It was a very special occasion that I hope I will never forget. There would have been no way that I was going to refuse an invitation to attend something so special and I am sure that you would have felt the same way regarding the event you were thinking of earlier.

Yet in our passage today, we read about exactly that. We hear Jesus tell a parable about the wedding feast of a royal family where those who were originally invited reject their invitation in a most disturbing way and so the king invites anyone he can find, both the bad and the good, to come and celebrate with him.

Context is King

Why does Jesus tell this parable and how does it speak to us today? Well to understand what it means it helps to look around the text to see if what comes before or after the passage gives us any clues. For today's passage there is a clue in the first few words - "And again Jesus spoke to them in parables..." The word 'again' indicates that if we look at the previous parables they might help us understand this one.

This is the third of three parables that Jesus tells to crowds of people in the temple in Jerusalem including the chief priests and the elders (Mt. 21:23a). In this series of three parables Jesus is addressing the rejection of God and his messengers including his Son, Jesus Christ.

In the first parable about two sons (Mt. 21:28-32) we see that what someone does is more important than what they are, that a tax collector or sinner who follows God's will is better than a religious person who doesn't. In the second parable, the parable of the wicked tenants, which was our gospel reading last week (Mt. 21:33-46) we see the guilt of the religious leaders in their rejection of God and his messengers and how they in return will be replaced by those who bear fruits for God's kingdom. These two parables help us to see what is going on in today's passage.

A Royal Invitation

The intention behind this parable about a royal wedding, when taken in the

context of Jesus' previous two parables, is clear to see. God has invited the Jews to celebrate the marriage of Jesus to God's people, a union between humanity and God which is the foundation for salvation. What an invitation to receive!

Let's just think about that invitation for a moment. An invitation to a wedding is a pretty significant invitation to receive. It shows the relationship between you and the couple, it's a wonderful celebration and a joyous occasion in which you receive the hospitality of the families that are getting married. An invitation to a royal wedding multiplies this significance tenfold. If you think back to the royal wedding between Harry and Megan those who were in attendance were those of national and international significance, either politically or culturally, with heads of state, a-list celebrities, and close family and friends invited. A royal wedding invitation is quite a momentous thing to receive.

If the significance of an invitation to a royal wedding means a lot now, it meant even more within Jesus' culture. In a more rigidly hierarchical society such an invitation meant you were one of the elite. You would have had the status of someone with political and social influence and it meant you had a connection to the one who not only currently wields all the power over the nation, but his successor too. In a culture that valued who you were connected to this invitation would have been seen as a golden ticket to everything you could have wanted! The wedding banquet would have also seen their guests generously catered for as we read in verse 4 of our passage with the slaughtering of the oxen and the fattened calves.

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What I am trying to emphasise here is that this is like no wedding invitation you or I or anyone alive today has ever received! It would have transformed the life of those who attended. And that is what God's invitation to the Jews was too. It was an invitation to be God's people, to be united with God and receive the gift of salvation that goes along with it. This is what God has promised the Jews in every covenant he has made with them since his covenant with Abraham - to be their God and for them to be his people and to receive the blessings from God that go with that. We see the value of God's invitation to the Jews as they are transformed from a childless couple in Abraham and Sarah into a might nation under the kingship of David and Solomon. It was the best invitation anyone could have received and God had given it to the Jews.

A Rejected Invitation

But, in spite of this fantastic invitation from God, the Jews rejected it. In verse 3

of our passage we read that the king (that is God) 'sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come.' Not only that, but in verses 4-6 we read of a second invitation to this group, this time with greater urgency and intention (the phrases "tell those who are invited..." and "come to the wedding feast" are commands from the king!) only for it once again be rejected and this time the servants are treated shamefully before they are then killed.

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In this parable Jesus is saying that the Jews have rejected God's invitation to be his people and to receive his blessings. God had invited them on numerous occasions, shown in the parable by the repeated invitation; firstly by the words of the prophets and then by John the Baptist and Jesus himself. God in his love for his people continues to offer them the chance to be his kingdom people, yet they refuse to accept the invitation preferring instead to tend to their own affairs rather than follow God's call.

It is no longer just the guilt of the religious leaders that I spoke about last week in the parable of the wicked tenants, but the whole nation that has rejected God's messengers, and, in a foreshadowing of Jesus' crucifixion, it is the whole nation that is culpable in the death of God's son.

In today's world, to reject the invitation from the royal family is strange, but not entirely unheard of as there are plenty of people who are not keen on the monarchy. But in the society Jesus was a part of such behaviour would not only have been relatively unheard of but on the occasions it did happen, would have been viewed as outrageous and offensive! Why? Partly because they are rejecting a life transforming opportunity, but also, to reject the invitation of the king was to shame the king.

The best way I can think of to try and explain why it brought shame on the king rather than the one who rejected the invitation is to use the example of the New Years Honours list. Occasionally, when the list of honours is produced we hear that someone has refused to accept the honour. In the majority of cases when this occurs the question isn't about why the person refused the honour, but what have the monarchy done to bring about such a rejection. The emphasis is always on the fault of the monarchy. Similarly a refused invitation at the time of Jesus would have brought shame on the one who was inviting rather than the one who refused.

Divine Justice

You can imagine how the king would have felt. In his generosity he has

repeatedly invited his guests in escalating appeals, even detailing the feast that awaits them if they accept, and yet in spite of this the invitation is repeatedly refused sometimes with a violent response. I'd be angry, I'd be more than angry, I'd be down right furious and appalled at such behaviour. And so it is with the king.

In verse 7 we read of the king's response: 'The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroy those murderers and burned their city' (Mt. 22:7). It is a justified response to such humiliation and rejection and gives us a vision of God's final judgement. Those who reject God, those who do not honour the invitation they have been given will not receive the blessings of God's kingdom when it comes in all its glory. The Jews here are described as those who 'were not worthy' (Mt. 22:8) and so no longer received the mercy of God and instead faced his judgement.

Divine Grace

But although there is judgement on the Jews within this parable it is not a rejection of the Jews entirely. As we read later on in verse 9 the invitation to the wedding banquet

is extended to 'as many as you can find' which includes both Jew and Gentile.

When verse 9 speaks of the king's servants going to the main roads it is referring to them going to the exit points of the city and so is implying that the message is going out beyond the city and into the countryside. God's invitation is extending out to all people.

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So although there is divine judgement we cannot forget about divine grace, for it is out of this grace that we ourselves have received an invitation into God's kingdom. Everyone, 'both bad and good', sinner and saint, have now been invited through the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ to be part of God's kingdom and all have the opportunity to accept it. All people have been invited to God's glorious, life-transforming wedding banquet.

Justice & Grace

Although all of us are now invited to be part of God's kingdom, God still has expectations of us, this is what we read about in verse 11-14. The guests are not allowed to be in attendance at the wedding banquet if they are not in the appropriate 'wedding garment' (Mt.22:11-12). Although we are invited, we are God's 'friends' as Jesus describes in verse 12, and are so recipients of his love and grace, we need to live a life appropriate to one of God's new people, that is what the wedding garment represents. If we do not live a life in response to God's

great gift then we too have rejected God's invitation just as the Jews did. We cannot forget God's message of justice and only remember his message of grace, to do so would be to live a pale imitation of the gospel.

This theme is a critical message throughout Matthew's gospel—God demands of those who enter his kingdom a level of “right living” in discipleship that will determine their place in the kingdom as shown in Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount and the

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Beatitudes (e.g. Matthew 5:6, 10, 20; 6:1, 33; 7:21–23; 21:41, 43; 24:45–25:30).

Christians today must take stock of our true membership within the kingdom, and ascertain whether we are truly living according to the standards of the new kingdom reality.

So that is what I leave with you today. God in his grace has invited us all to come and have our lives transformed for the better by being part of his kingdom. This is a glorious invitation to receive with the promise of being part of community here on earth and an eternal kingdom in heaven, based on love, full of purpose, and that seeks justice. But to accept this invitation means accepting a new way of living, a way of living that follows God's ways and not our own and accepts that to reject this lifestyle leads to facing God's judgement. Each of us must look deep into our own hearts and ask the question that Paul asks of the church in Ephesus: ‘Do I live a life worthy of my calling from God? Do I live a life that reflects God's kingdom? (Eph. 4:1).