

## Proper 23 Pentecost XXII October 12, 2008

Isn't that the darndest parable? The whole thing just sort of jerks along, and doesn't quite work, especially when you get to the poor fellow who is tossed into the outer darkness for violating the dress code. Puzzling. What I want to do is unpack this a little, and maybe make it a bit easier to grasp.

First of all, this is one of those parables where the writer, here it's Matthew, takes a story of Jesus and re-works it for his own purposes. (We saw pretty much the same thing last week. You can see another version of the parable—probably one a lot closer to the one Jesus told, in Luke 14.) What Matthew does is sort of soup up the story so it isn't exactly a street-legal parable any more. Instead, it's an allegory of salvation history—a way of telling what Matthew sees as *the* central movements of God's actions and plans for all of human history. Since it's an allegory and not a parable, we (and Matthew) don't need to bother too much about whether the details of the thing make sense the way they do with regular parables. So we don't need to worry about how the king keeps dinner warm while he makes war against the first set of invited guests, destroys their city, and then has the banquet in that same city pretty much on the same day. That sort of thing is no problem for an allegory.

That's because the first guests stand for Israel, the first two sets of slaves who issue the invitation are the prophets of the old covenant, (which is why they are killed—hardly the usual way of declining an invitation) and the city that is destroyed is Jerusalem. So, a little literary inconsistency is swallowed right up in the sweep of world history. The next time around, the slaves who are sent into the main streets to invite *just anybody* are the Apostles, the followers of Jesus after the resurrection, who brought together the Church. And the Church, Matthew knew all too well, was filled with both good and bad, righteous and unrighteous, deserving and undeserving.

After all, everyone mean *everyone*, good, bad and indifferent. This is a very different crowd from the first one—just like the Church was very different from the leaders of Israel. So, here we are—the wedding hall is filled with all sorts of guests. This precise moment in the story is Matthew’s present—the world as he knew it; and as we know it. This was the present age of the Church.

Matthew is expressing the early Christian belief that, in spite of the words of the prophets and of John the Baptist, Israel, especially Israel’s leaders, who Jesus is talking to, had repeatedly ignored God’s invitation to his great messianic banquet, the banquet for his son, for Jesus. So the Church is formed by the Apostles—those slaves who are sent to everybody else, to the lower classes, to women, to the gentiles, to the ones who had been ignored—and they are told not to judge, but to invite. That was the way things were when Matthew used this parable of Jesus to tell the story of salvation history.

What happens next is big. Real big. What happens next is the end of all things, the second coming, the final judgment—the King arrives; and the King comes, apparently for the first time, to see his guests; to see who has managed to stumble or to be dragged into the party.

Now, at this point, everybody becomes real interested in the poor schmuck who gets tossed out. All sorts of things have been written about why he gets the boot—which mostly has to do with guessing what the reference to a wedding robe, or a wedding garment, meant back then. (In fact, nobody really knows, and also, in fact, it doesn’t much matter—I’ll get to that second ‘in fact’ in a minute) Since nobody really knows what a wedding robe meant the guesses have run amuck. They have included everything from ordinary clean clothes to a robe everybody supposedly had hanging in their house if they would only take a second to pick it up, to the white garments often given to newly baptized Christians.

Some interpreters even say the problem is the guy's silence, not his clothes, while others like to talk about an inner state or condition. Some say the wedding robe it is the 'garment of good works'; while St. Augustine said that it was "love that springs from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and a genuine faith". (In Augustine's case, at least, it's easier to believe that this poor guy *didn't* have it than it is to believe that everyone else *did*.)

Anyway, one of my favorites of these theories is that the wedding garment was a was a robe that the host gave to the guests as they arrived, and that the guests then put on over whatever else they were wearing. There is some good evidence for this understanding, and it fits with what Matthew is talking about.

But remember, what is happening here is not supposed to be an precise example of Palestinian social customs. Concern for accurate detail has gone out the window. This is the final judgment. So, Matthew is saying that—even though the Church is filled with good and bad alike; and even though the Apostles who call people to the Church are not themselves to judge and are not themselves to exclude; and even though absolutely everyone is invited and absolutely everyone is handed all they need both to be properly dressed and to have a great time at the party—even though all of that, still, sooner or later, the King is going to arrive in person, and, if you matter, if you are a real person, then you gotta be able to say no.

You have to be able to reject the invitation, to ignore the robe—otherwise, you aren't really there. The guy who refuses to put on the garment becomes a symbol for everyone invited to the feast who none the less declines to participate. It's about the freedom we human beings have to just say no to God—it's not about some weird over-reaction to wearing the wrong outfit.

And it's important that we have this choice, that we have the freedom to say no, to refuse to put on the garment, whatever that means, and so take our chances outside. If we can't do that, if we can't say no, then we can't really say yes, either; and we are just sheep rounded up into a gilded pen. Our humanity, our freedom, our very dignity, these demand that we have what the king gave that total idiot in the story—which is the opportunity to walk away from the greatest gift he could imagine, a gift he had in fact already been given; and the opportunity to be thrown out to the best other place he could possibly be, the place he already was.

I'll admit, the guy had to work at it—he was given all sorts of chances; but the King would not take away his chance to say no; the king would not treat him as someone whose actions didn't matter, and whose choices didn't matter.

Like I said, it's the darndest parable. It's Matthew's telling of the whole story of sacred history, from the beginning of Israel to his guesses about the final judgment. So, of course, the story is mainly about invitations—about God's constant, persistent, and repeated invitation to God's great party. That's what happens most.

Finally, who knows about our stubborn friend gnashing around in the outer darkness? The parable hints that the character of the King is such that, sooner or later, he just might send a slave or two out that direction to issue, as he did with his first set of guest, one more set of invitations. As we heard in Exodus, the Lord has been know to change his mind, even about destruction.