

Trinity 20

I take as my text today from St. Matthew's Gospel:

Then saith he to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy. Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

Soon, we will be celebrating the Feast of All Saints, our patronal festival, and it is so fitting that our Parish was consecrated as All Saints, for each time we celebrate the Holy Eucharist, we are joining with all the Saints to the glory of God. The hymnist says it so well in the third verse of hymn 124:

Thine earthly members fit
To join thy saints above,
In one communion ever knit,
One fellowship of love.

We truly are in "One fellowship of love" as we come to partake of that Heavenly Banquet prepared for us, the Altar our banquet table to which we are invited by God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

As we turn to the Gospel passage for today taken from St. Matthew, we find an allusion to this divine fellowship, as we see our Lord using two parables to illustrate a single truth.

That truth is very simply that we have no right to claim the privileges of the Kingdom of Heaven if we are not willing to accept the responsibilities involved in admission to the Kingdom.

The first parable, the Marriage Feast, and the second, the Wedding Garment, in essence, together form a description of the spiritual banquet set before mankind.

The first parable, the Wedding Feast, Jesus uses an earthly event, a feast following a marriage, to describe a spiritual truth; here, the Wedding Feast follows on the union that is betwixt Christ and His Church; clearly it's not just a spiritual banquet, it's a glorious feast that includes the pardon of sin, favor with God, peace of conscience, access to the Throne of Grace, the comforts of the Spirit, and the assurance of eternal life. This is a feast open to everyone, but there is a tragedy that unfolds in the parable, and a parallel through the ages, even today, in the refusal of the invited guests to attend.

Jesus, in telling this parable, describes three invitations, two of which, in the context of the times, are obvious.

The first invitation is preliminary. It essentially tells the guests that they are invited to an upcoming feast. No specific date and time is mentioned in the invitation. Such an invitation reflects eastern custom in our Lord's day.

The second is the explicit invitation. As was customary, it says the feast is ready, and requests the immediate presence of the guests.

Under such circumstances, it was not unusual that when guests received their preliminary invitation, especially if it were from a wealthy person, they would immediately prepare themselves for the inevitable summons that would follow. Of course, there were some who would dress in their better clothes, while yet proceeding to work in them until, when the call comes, they find them soiled and unfit to wear. And others might go about their business, waiting until the last minute to get appropriately dressed.

But, as we hear in the parable, when the feast is ready, strangely, the invitation is refused. Indeed, spitefully so by some, who mistreated the servants carrying the invitation, even going so far as to kill them. What a rather strange reaction to an invitation to a grand wedding feast!

And what could Jesus have been implying in this first parable? Could He have been saying, "Listen, I am inviting you to a most wonderful feast, and you are not responding. You cannot see it but, Israel, your refusal will lead to tragedy."

How tragic that the invitation to such a joyful event is turned down, not just then, but again and again over the centuries. Why? For what reasons do people turn a deaf ear to our Lord?

The pretexts for refusal of the invitation really haven't changed over two thousand years. For many, it's the everyday affairs of life, not necessarily bad in themselves. As then, so today, we often get caught up in a busy world, so caught up with the present that the things of eternity are overlooked, forgotten.

But, as we see in the parable, a third invitation is sent. It is this invitation that reveals to the world God's divine mercy, by seeking others to come in to the banquet, in this case, the gentiles, who, unlike the Jews, accept the bidding. Those in the byways and along the highways, those who were good, as well as those who were not, and the hall was filled with guests.

Yet, there is one strange twist: the wedding garment. There is the one who enters without his garment, and is cast out into the darkness, bound hand and foot.

In reality, it could very well have happened just so.

It was customary in eastern culture that all the guests were required to wear a wedding garment, as in the case of a wedding banquet, or a garment proper for whatever the occasion; indeed, guests to any feast were not only expected to wear an appropriate garment or attire, but also, some hosts even supplied the garment, usually a simple robe.

Arriving without, or refusing to don, the appropriate garment could, and often did, have dire consequences, for in the case of a royal occasion, the wearing of the garment signified loyalty to the king.

This wedding garment has a great deal of significance for us today. It is the symbolic representation of our laying aside the old garment of sin and self-righteousness, and clothing ourselves with penitence and divine righteousness.

And what garment awaits us in the end is beautifully foretold by the poet in the second verse of hymn 130, sung here on occasion, and written in 1719 by Theobald Heinricj Schrenck:

Who are these of dazzling brightness,
These in God's own truth arrayed,
Clad in robes of purest whiteness,
Robes whose luster ne'er shall fade,
Ne'er be touched by time's rude hand?
Whence comes all this glorious band?

In this hymn, we see how we, along with all the Saints, shall stand before God's throne properly clad in eternal purity and righteousness, fitly attired to appear before the King of kings.

While in this life, when we don the wedding garment, we, as St. Paul tells us, "put on the Lord Jesus Christ." We become identified as belonging to Christ. We can thus be distinguished from all the others who arrive at the banquet, but who have not prepared themselves for the occasion.

Putting on the wedding garment symbolizes our becoming a new person, by accepting God's Grace, and sharing in his love for all of creation.

While God's Grace is freely given to everyone, it also brings with it a responsibility. That responsibility involves a change in our lives. We cannot continue living our old lives; we must change our lives to fit the love that God has given us.

As we accept God's Grace and Love, we clothe ourselves with a new purity and holiness and goodness, which are fitting clothes for this heavenly banquet that awaits us.

We do so of our own free will. Just as the guest who refused to wear the wedding garment did so of his own free will, we freely choose to follow our Lord, and enjoy the great privileges of the Kingdom of God; or we freely choose not to follow our Lord, and suffer Divine Judgment.

The parable reminds us of the harsh judgment that awaits those who reject our Lord, while at the same time, we see God's great mercy extended to those who accept His invitation to eternal life. Here, we see a balance between the God of Judgment represented in the Old Testament, and the God of Love represented in the New Testament.

If we choose to wear the wedding garment, we do so freely, and we become God's chosen ones. Our lives reflect a character consistent with the Gospel we profess. We begin to live our faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God.

One of the crowning, glorious moments in living that faith comes when we receive the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist. It is our earthly foretaste of the Heavenly Banquet that awaits us; it is where we can show our loyalty, and receive spiritual nourishment to continue living our faith, in the sure hope of being admitted to His eternal Kingdom.

The King sends out his invitations to the feast. What is our response? How we will dress?

Will we put on the wedding garment that symbolizes our commitment to the King, Christ the King?

A garment that reflects character consistent with what we profess to believe as Christians: a holy life?

Will we don a garment that reflects an inward, spiritual happiness, developed by the presence of God, and the consciousness of heaven?

We have received our invitations. What are we going to do with them? Do we have the commitment? Are we willing to make a change in our lives, and as St. Paul says, "put on the Lord Jesus Christ," so we will be properly clothed, and received into the banquet hall?

The Eucharistic Feast we celebrate today is just a foretaste of what awaits us. The commitment we make to our small parish is just one manifestation of our greater commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

In a very real sense, we each are servants of the King, with invitations we can hand out to everyone who will accept them. We can invite others to the Eucharist Feast we celebrate.

Our preparation for that glorious day requires Commitment and Doing. We cannot sit back and rest on our laurels. It requires Change, a change in our lives. It requires Faith and Works, each dependent on the other. And it requires Love, love of God and of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ; love of all of God's Creation, especially each other.

Commitment and Doing, Change, Faith and Works, and Love — all essential elements in our personal preparation for the Wedding Feast, that glorious heavenly banquet.