

Don't Miss The Party!

A Challenging Wedding Sermon based on Matt 22.1-14

Ministry Today Issue 50 (November 2010)

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(From time to time couples getting married specify the passage of Scripture they would like me to preach on at their wedding. I am normally happy to oblige, because this enables the service to become more personal. However, I was not so happy about the last request I received, because I found the passage extraordinarily demanding. The groom wanted me to preach a hard-hitting Gospel sermon for the non-Christian members of his family. In particular he wanted me to preach on Jesus' parable of the wedding feast (Matthew 22.1-14). I confess I was not keen to do so - the story ends with a wedding guest being thrown into outer darkness! However, in spite of my reluctance, I agreed to the request. I thought readers of Ministry Today might be interested to see how I tackled this challenging parable of Jesus.)

I love parties, and so too did Jesus. Indeed, the suggestion has been made that Jesus may have been a somewhat tubby in figure - a Friar Tuck figure - for his critics accused him of being a glutton and having a fondness for wine. Jesus was into parties big-time. On one occasion he was at a wedding when they ran out of water. What did he do? He turned 600 litres of water into wine. That must have been some party!

On one occasion Jesus told a story about a wedding feast in which he likened the Kingdom of God to a party. At Mark and Hazel's request, I want to use this story as the basis for my sermon.

1. God Invites Us to a Party

Jesus said: "The Kingdom of heaven is like this. Once there was a king who prepared a wedding feast for his son..." (v.1). Wow! That comes as a shock to the system. Many non-Christians have the impression that life in the Kingdom of God must be more like a funeral, for so many Christians look as if they are suffering from gall-stones and seem to have as much life in them as a dried up prune. But the truth is that the Kingdom of God is not made up of black-suited saints with blacker Bibles, nor is it made up of grim repressed souls without a smile on their lips - it is made up of joyful party-goers. Kingdom people are party people. OK, we are dealing here with metaphor - the details are not to be pressed - but one thing is certain: life in the Kingdom of God is going to be full of joy. Not for nothing did the Oxbridge English

don, C S Lewis, entitle the story of his conversion: '*Surprised by Joy*'. And in one of his other books he wrote that "Joy is the serious business of heaven".

The Kingdom of God can be likened to a party. The Christian life is not about obeying a list of rules and regulations - it is about a relationship in which God is our friend and our host. God wants the very best for us - and that very best is life in the Kingdom.

2. God's Invitation Can Be Refused

God invites us to a party - but he does not force us to accept his invitation. His invitation is a genuine invitation, and as such can be refused. We see this in the parable: "The King... sent his servants to tell the invited guests to come to the feast" (v.3). God treats us as people, not as marionettes. He doesn't pull our strings, but rather allows us freedom to accept or not accept the invitation to his party.

Strangely the invited guests "did not want to come"! My mind boggles - I have never turned down a wedding invitation if I could possibly help it. If I have not been able to accept a wedding invitation, then this has always been a cause for regret. But in the parable there is no sense of regret. The guests were free to come, but they "did not want to come". So, they "paid no attention and went about their business" (v.5).

When Jesus first told this parable, he had the Jewish nation and its leaders in mind. God had sent the prophets to call his people back to him, but they had rejected that call - indeed, like some of the guests in the parable, they had attacked the servants who had delivered the invitation, and even killed some of them. They refused to accept God's invitation to life in his Kingdom. What was true of the Jewish nation is also true of many people today. They make all kinds of excuses for not accepting God's invitation of new life: "Maybe some other time, God - maybe when I've passed my exams, when I've climbed the greasy ladder at work, when the family has grown up, maybe when I'm retired - but not now". Sadly one day, it will be too late to accept God's invitation. We need to accept God's invitation now.

3. God's Invitation Is For Us All

The king was in a spot - the marquee was up - the caterers had arrived - the food was ready - but the invited guests now refused to come - what was he to do? The king decided to invite everybody and anybody: "He called his servants and said to them... Now go to the main streets and invite to the feast as many people as you find". 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" (vv.8a,9,10).

When Jesus first told this parable, he was telling the Jewish leaders of his day that, since they had turned their back on God's purposes, the good news of the Kingdom was now to be shared with the non-Jewish world - the people "in the main streets" in the parable represent the Gentiles. The context in which we find ourselves today is different, and yet the parable still contains an important truth, namely that God still

invites everybody into his Kingdom. Indeed, according to Jesus, God invites the “good and bad alike” (v.10). What an amazing thought: it doesn’t matter what we’ve been or what we’ve done or how much of a mess we have made of our lives. God still invites us to come to his party.

4. God’s Invitation Demands a Change

As the king walks among his guests, he spots one of them wearing a smudged, grubby robe. “Friend, how did you get in here without wedding clothes?” (v.12). Then the king told the servants, “Tie him up hand and foot and throw him outside in the dark. There he will cry and grind his teeth” (v.13).

What on earth was Jesus on about? We need to understand that the wedding clothes in mind were not special party clothes - they were clean clothes which were kept for best, as distinct from dirty working clothes. Even those who were invited at the last minute were expected to go home and change for the party. But one guest didn’t bother. One guest chose to come just as he was. The point is this: God invites everybody to share the life of his Kingdom. But if we want to do so, then we have to change - and the change at issue is not a change of clothes, but a change of life. We have to give up old prejudices and old habits and instead adopt a new way of living. Or to use religious language: God is willing to forgive our sin, but he is not prepared for us to hang onto our self-centeredness. If we do hang onto our sin, then the consequences are grave. We shall be excluded from the party - we shall be excluded from the Kingdom. And then we will rue the day when we failed to take God seriously.

Gosh, that’s a grim thought for a happy wedding day. So instead, let me accentuate the positive: God invites us all of us to his party. Sadly no married couple is able to invite everybody to their wedding reception - there are always limits. But not as far as God is concerned. This is what Mark and Hazel want me to convey to you today.

They are delighted that you are sharing in their joy today, but even more, they want you to share in the joy of God’s kingdom. So please, don’t miss out on God’s party!