

MATT 22.1-14: THE PARABLE OF THE WEDDING FEAST
[Chelmsford 31 October 2010]

What will eternity be like? Nick Hornby, a keen Arsenal fan, wrote in his book *Fever Pitch*:

“It would be nice to think that I could hang around inside the stadium in some form and watch the first team one Saturday, the reserves the next; I would like to feel that my children and grandchildren will be Arsenal fans and that I could watch with them. It doesn’t seem a bad way to spend eternity... I want to float around Highbury as a ghost watching reserve games for the rest of time”.

For people like Martin Hills, our youth minister, this might well be their idea of heaven. For many of us, however, it would be more our idea of hell.

Rudyard Kipling pictured heaven as one gigantic art studio:

*When Earth’s last picture is painted and the tubes are twisted and dried,
When the oldest colours have faded, and the youngest critic has died,
We shall rest, and faith, we shall need it – lie down for an aeon or two,
Till the Master of All Good Workmen shall put us to work anew.*

*And those that were good shall be happy: they shall sit in a golden chair;
They shall splash at a ten-league canvas with brushes of comets’ hair.
They shall find real saints to draw from – Magdalene, Peter and Paul;
They shall work for an age at a sitting and never be tried at all!*

*And only the Master shall praise us, and only the Master shall blame;
And no one shall work for money, and no one shall work for fame,
But each for the joy of the working, and each, in his separate star,
Shall draw the Thing as he sees It for the God of Things as they are!”*

I guess that this idea of heaven might appeal to Rob, our son-in-law. But then he’s a professional artist. The idea of heaven being an eternal painting session fills me, however, with dread – it would be a life of eternal embarrassment.

I warm much more to the traditional Jewish depiction of the hereafter.

The Jews pictured life in God’s kingdom as the mother of all feasts.

Let me read to you some words from Isaiah 25 in Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase: **“But here on this Mountain, God-of-the-Angel-Armies will throw a feast for all the people of the world, a feast of the finest foods, a feast with vintage wines, a feast of seven courses, a feast lavish with gourmet desserts. And here on this mountain God will banish the pall of doom hanging over all peoples, the shadow of doom darkening all nations. Yes, he’ll banish death forever. And God will wipe the tears from every face”.**

What a wonderful picture. It is this picture of the Kingdom of God as a feast that Jesus takes up and uses in his parable of the wedding feast.

As I reflect on the parable of Jesus four things come to mind:-

1. GOD INVITES US TO A CELEBRATION

“The Kingdom of heaven is like this. Once there was a king who prepared a wedding feast for his son..” (v1). Let’s stop the story there.
Jesus likens life in the Kingdom of God to a non-stop party.

Wow! That comes as a shock to the system. Many non-Christians have the impression that life in the Kingdom of God is going to be like an everlasting siesta. Hence those gravestones with the initials RIP – Rest in Peace. Alternatively they have the inscription ‘*Peace, perfect peace*’; or perhaps ‘*Rest in peace darling*’. In the Kingdom of God it would appear that the clocks are turned back forever – the alarm never sounds and we sleep forever.

But no, says Jesus, the Kingdom of God is going to be like a party. It’s going to be like a non-stop wedding celebration. Indeed, in the Book of Revelation John writes that he **“heard what sounded like a large crowd, like the sound of a roaring waterfall, like loud peals of thunder. I heard them say...‘Let us rejoice and be glad... For the time has come for the wedding of the Lamb, and his bride has prepared herself’”**.

OK, we are dealing here with metaphor - the details are not to be pressed - in this world we see but in a mirror darkly.

But we can be sure is that life in ***the Kingdom of God is going to be full of joy***. Not for nothing did the Oxbridge English don, CS 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*”

Note too that it is going to be a life of shared joy.

We shall be together with our loved ones – and indeed many others too – sharing in God’s kingdom. On this day when we are thanking God for loved ones who have died, let us remind ourselves that the Bible teaches not the survival of the individual soul – that could be a very lonely existence – but rather a life of togetherness and of shared joy.

Heaven is something to be looked forward to.

It is the end of all our limitations – it is the end of all our suffering.

It is all that we could hope for – and far more.

This reminds me the man who asked a friend whom he hadn’t seen for years, ‘How is your wife?’ ‘She’s in heaven’, replied the friend. ‘Oh, I’m sorry’. Then he realized that that was not the thing to say, so he added, ‘I mean, I’m glad’. And that was even worse. He finally came out with ‘Well, I’m surprised’!

Heaven is not to be feared. The Kingdom of God is like a **“wedding feast”** – full of happiness and joy.

2. GOD'S INVITATION CAN BE REFUSED

God invites us to a celebration - but he does not force us to accept his invitation. His invitation is a genuine invitation - and as such can be refused. God treats us as people - and not as marionettes. He doesn't pull our strings, but rather allows us freedom to accept or not accept the invitation to his party. We see this in the parable. **"The King... sent his servants to tell the invited guests to come to the feast"** (v3).

In those days guests normally received not only an invitation, but a reminder too - *'the food is ready, come and get it'* - or, in the words of the parable, **'My feast is ready now; my bullocks and prize calves have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast!'** (v4).

Strangely in the parable the invited guests, who had already in principle accepted the invitation to attend this royal wedding, **"did not want to come"**! My mind boggles - I have never turned down a wedding invitation if I could possibly help it. The only reason for not accepting a wedding invitation would be if I had some other major commitment. I would then have to decline with great regret.

But in the parable there is no sense of regret. The guests were free to come - but they **"did not want to come"** - indeed **"they would not come"** (NRSV). So, they **"paid no attention and went about their business"** (v5). NRSV: **"they made light of it and went away"**

When Jesus first told this parable, he had a particular group of people in mind. ***The parable was aimed at the Jewish leaders of his day*** and referred to the way in which down through the centuries the Jewish nation had for the most part rejected God and his ways. 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 come to church and hear a preacher speak of Jesus, but to all intents & purposes, say *'No thank you'*. Like the guests in the parable, they are more interested in the every-day concerns of life. *'Sorry God, I can't accept your invitation - I've got no time to party - I've got another engagement'*. They pretend they are too busy for God and 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. Let me be personal: ***you need to accept God's invitation now!*** It has been said that the path to hell is paved with good excuses - people who intended to get around to accepting the invitation, but not at the moment, thank you. Wouldn't it be dreadful to miss out on the life on the life of heaven. Let's ensure that we accept God's invitation today.

3. GOD'S INVITATION IS FOR US ALL

But to return to the parable again.

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, having drawn a blank with his 'A' list, decides to invite everybody else - not just those in the 'B' or 'C' list., but everybody - even those in the 'Z' list. Wow! This really was going to be some celebration.

“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” (8a, 9,10).

When Jesus first told this parable, he had a particular point to make.

In effect, he was telling the Jewish leaders of his day, that since they had turned their backs 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 is different - the question of taking the Gospel of the Kingdom to the Gentiles is no longer an issue - and yet the parable still contains an essential truth which we all still need to heed.

For ***God still invites everybody into his Kingdom*** - the **“good and bad alike”** (v10). Incidentally, in the original Greek, the word order is different: Jesus talks of the **“bad and good alike”**. The bad have as much priority as the good. Indeed, if anything the word order suggests that the bad have the priority!

In this respect, has it ever occurred to you that ***the king in the parable doesn't seem to have any moral values*** - he didn't seem to care what kind of people he welcomed to his feast. Can this be an image of the God we worship? Yes, it can!

God doesn't check references. Our neat notions or morality God sweeps aside. It doesn't matter what you've been or what you've done or how much of a mess you have made of your life. We are none of us good in the sight of God, but all of us are loved and invited to God's table.

The story is told of a little girl who was found weeping because she couldn't attend a party for disabled children: ***“I can't get in”***, she cried, ***“There's nothing the matter with me”***. Fortunately, as far as we all are concerned we all are eligible - for there is something the matter with all of us. Call it evil, call it sin, call it what you will, but none of us, no one, is good enough to deserve God's invitation. And yet it comes to each of us personally, and it comes now.

4. GOD'S INVITATION DEMANDS A CHANGE

“The hall was filled with people” (v10), says the parable.

Clearly many decided to accept the king's invitation.

But suddenly, there is a change in the story.

A strange last chapter is written for us to read.

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?**” (v12).

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**” (v24).

What on earth did Jesus have in mind?

We need to understand that the wedding clothes in mind were not formal morning dress - rather *the wedding clothes in question 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.*

Although the invitation to the Kingdom is addressed to all, *if we want to enter the Kingdom we have to change - and the change at issue is not a change of clothes, but a change of life.*

God calls us, yes, and the invitation is free, but if we say ‘Lord I will follow you’, then our whole way of life has to change.

We have to ‘repent’: i.e. give up old prejudices, old habits, old ways of living life - and instead adopt a new way of living and a new way of loving. *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 life of the Kingdom. And then we will really cry and grind our teeth - then we will rue the day when we failed to take God seriously.

Gosh that's not a happy thought. So instead, let me accentuate the positive God invites all of us to share in the life of the kingdom. Sadly no couple are ever able to invite everybody to their wedding reception – there are always limits. But God has no limits – in heaven there is room for us all.

Jesus concluded, “**Many are invited, but few are chosen**” (v14)

We misunderstand Jesus if we see here a reference to predestination - the term “the chosen” was a technical term for those who belonged to the community of the saved - the emphasis was on the fact of membership, rather than the means of achieving it. Jesus in other words was saying “*Many are invited, but few are saved*”.

‘The message of this verse is that of the parable of the sower: there is many a slip between initial response to the gospel and ultimate fruitfulness’ (Dick France).

Let me urge you this morning to ensure that you belong to the saved

Let me urge you to ensure that your future in the Kingdom of God is really secure.

Don't take God's gracious invitation for granted.

Don't miss on the life of heaven!