

Proper 23, Year A

October 12, 2014

Matthew 22:1-14 *Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."*

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus tells a parable which is similar in many ways to last week's parable of the absentee landowner who leased his vineyard to tenants (who later proved to be scoundrels). Those tenants, you remember, would not give the landowner the produce of his harvest, mistreating two consecutive groups of slaves which the landowner sent, and then killing the landowner's own son. The wicked tenants get their comeuppance, and they are replaced by more faithful stewards. In *today's* parable, a king throws a great wedding feast for his son, and sends his slaves to invite his chosen guests to the feast. Now, as you can imagine, to be invited to the wedding feast of the king's son is a great honor and privilege – and yet those who are invited do not come! The king next sends *other* slaves to those same guests, to issue the invitation again: "Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet." But the invited guests *reject* the king's invitation *again*: one goes to his business, the other to his farm, and the rest mistreat the king's slaves and kill them!

But a wedding feast for a king's son is a matter of *utmost* importance. The feast is ready, the food is getting cold, and the banquet hall *must* be filled. So the king sends out *more* servants, *into the streets* this time, to invite as many as they can find to the wedding feast. The messengers invite every age and ethnic group, those who are good and those who are bad, to the banquet; and they come.

Last week I said that the parable of the unscrupulous tenants *could* be interpreted on a strictly historical level: the tenants are the leaders of the Jewish people, who mistreated the prophets that God had sent, and would soon kill God's own son. God would replace those Jewish religious leaders with others who would be faithful stewards of God's will and word – presumably, those in Matthew's own community. Similarly, **today's** parable *can* be interpreted on a simply historical basis: those who reject the king's invitation to his son's wedding are the scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' and Matthew's day who reject the kingdom of heaven that Jesus preaches and ushers in. When God's **first**-chosen people reject the invitation into the kingdom of heaven, God invites the Gentiles into his kingdom.

But as we saw last week, there are deeper levels of meaning in these parables than strictly the historical level. Fr. John Shea believes that in *today's* parable, the wedding banquet can be seen as a special moment in time, for as Jesus proclaimed, the kingdom of heaven is at hand. "An unparalleled event in the history of the religious tradition of Israel is unfolding," Fr. Shea writes. "God is inviting people to partake in the fullness of joy, the time when his son, Jesus, will marry." Symbolically, Jesus the bridegroom will marry his bride – but **who** the bride will *be* is a mystery at this point in the parable.

"The religious leadership of Israel, representing *past* special moments, are invited," Fr. Shea notes. "However, they refuse. Even when God reaffirms that this is a *special* time and a *special* feast—with all in readiness—they go about as if nothing important is happening. Their farming and their businesses demand their attention. **Ordinary** time consumes them as the *special* time eludes them... However, the feast is ready and it **will** happen." (*On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, pp. 297-298)

So God makes the invitation to the banquet indiscriminate: there will be no qualifications necessary, not even moral ones, for the kingdom of God is not a matter of worthiness, but grace. And the banquet hall becomes filled with guests.

But we are told that there is one guest who is not wearing a wedding robe, and this ends him up outside the banquet hall. Now the meaning of this enigmatic "wedding robe" has been interpreted in dozens of ways down through the centuries. John Shea offers a unique and insightful explanation of the wedding robe: he sees the wedding robe as not something **guests** wear to the wedding, but rather what the *bride* wears: the robe is a bridal gown. "It seems that *the guests* are the **bride**," Fr. Shea writes. "They were not invited to *witness* a wedding; they were invited to be married to the son. They were not invited to observe; they were invited to participate. The requirement is a wedding robe, an eagerness to be united to the son... 'Marrying the son' is a symbol for the Christian adventure of spiritual development... (ibid., p. 299)

"This wedding robe signals a readiness to understand and act on Jesus' teachings. They must make them their own. They must marry the revelation and bear

children, acts of justice, compassion, and love in the world. If they do not do this and are reduced to silence, a silence of incomprehension, they cannot remain at the feast. This is a wedding only for those who want to be married.” (ibid., pp. 298-299)

My friends, I find this interpretation to make more sense than any of the other dozen interpretations I have heard or read about. The metaphor of the Church as the bride of Christ is repeated in several places in the New Testament, as when St. Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, said, “I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.” (2 Cor. 11:2) Paul doesn’t want the church to be *guests* at Christ’s wedding, he wants the members of the church to *marry* Christ! Jesus doesn’t want spectators, he wants participants who will become one with him in divine union. Three chapters earlier in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus quoted the Book of Genesis, saying, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and unite with his wife, and *the two will become one.*” **That’s** what this parable of the Wedding Banquet is all about: not our watching Christ from afar, as *spectators* at a wedding, but rather *our* becoming one with him in heart, soul, mind, word, and deed: coming to be *in* Christ, a phrase which St. Paul uses 165 times.

Regarding the man without the wedding robe, Fr. Shea writes, “Just belonging to the Church is not enough. Hearing the call is a first step, but it is not the final condition. Each Christian is chosen as a bride for Christ, chosen to have intercourse with the revelation of God and be filled by God’s grace. That means going beyond silent attendance. Hearing the call is easy; marrying the son is difficult.” (ibid., p. 299)

But there is a danger for us in paying *too* much attention to the ones in the parable who reject the invitation to the banquet, or the one person who is not wearing the wedding robe. We must remember that in Matthew’s day there is a tremendous family squabble going on between those in the Jewish community who would interpret Judaism after the fall of the Temple in *legalistic* terms and those in the Jewish community – like Matthew – who would interpret Judaism along the lines of Jesus. The *roots* of this parable may well go back to Jesus, for Luke includes a different, shorter version of this same parable in **his** Gospel. But as Professor David Lose says, “Matthew’s version is darker, more violent.” (see “...in the Meantime” blog) John Shea calls Matthew a “lover of dualistic outcomes” (as are many of us!), and Fr. Shea says that he believes the central point of the parable is not the part where the king, in a rage, sends his troops to kill those who rejected his invitation and burn their city, nor is it the part where the guest without the wedding robe is bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Not one of these details is found in Luke’s version of the parable. (Luke 14:16-24) Rather, the central message of the parable – which is clear in Luke – is the king’s desire to fill his banquet hall with all sorts of people, good and bad alike. For, as Fr. Shea wisely notes, “good and bad are not final states; they are temporary designations. Once inside, you

might come to learn that the Son finds you desirable. Even though you did not come with a wedding robe, the groom has one for you. [And] He has chosen it with great love.” (ibid., p. 301)

AMEN