

Matthew 22:1-14
A fool at the feast

Simply receive all God needs to give you

I suppose that you could say that the last year and a half, not just in this country, but all around the world, has been a bit of a **roller-coaster ride**. Not literal, of course, because those **theme parks** will have been shut for substantial parts of that time. But we use the phrase to denote something with lots of unexpected - and quite possibly teeth-jarring **twists and turns**.

And I really feel that this parable we're looking at this morning is exactly like that. As I've read it several times over the last week, it seems to lurch around and keep us off-balance all the way through. You maybe feel you recognise some strands of it - particularly if you've been here the last couple of weeks, as we've looked at the two preceding parables in this set of three - and then Jesus' sends, as the Americans say, a **curveball** down, and we're suddenly jinked in an entirely unexpected direction.

And maybe that just shows that this "kingdom of God" thing - that's how Jesus starts it off ...

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to ... "

(Matthew 22:2)

... well, it's just a tricky thing to get our heads around. Perhaps particularly when it's this stuff about the grace of God. Because our minds just do not naturally think that way. God said that explicitly a long time back:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD.

(Isaiah 55:8)

And in what particular way is he talking about? We get that in the previous verse. Forgiveness. Pardon. Grace. That kind of stuff.

"[L]et the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."

(Isaiah 55:7)

And we certainly have an example of that, I would have said, in the guy we hear about at the end of this parable in Matthew 22.

You see, in so many things, we can make mistakes in two opposite directions. Some of us will tend to think that our sins are too great for even the grace of God. We think we do not deserve to be forgiven for ... *that* ... perhaps especially that *repeated* "that". And we underestimate the willingness of God to pardon sin. We block out that word **abundantly** there in Isaiah 55. Some people need just ordinary

forgiveness, but I need *abundant* forgiveness. And we misunderstand that that is God's routine and only level of forgiveness. Every drop of grace is amazing. And not a single drop of it is *grudgingly* given by God.

But other people will neglect a different bit of that verse: the **forsake** and **return** words. It is an *underestimation* of their sins. There is a feeling that we don't particularly need any depth of great compassion, because we're *not* all that bad. What we do may not be perfect, but it's not *totally* unpresentable.

Well, we'll see how Jesus deals with both of these in this final parable of the group. Remember that he is replying to being accosted by this group of religious high-ups as he is teaching in the temple.

And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

(Matthew 21:23)

It's only just a few days before he's going to be arrested, tried, and executed. Things are definitely coming to a head, and some of the outrageous things that Jesus now says are clearly raising the tensions - are clearly *designed* to raise those tensions, too, I think I'd say. First up, there's that very brief parable of the two sons.

"What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' ... "

(Matthew 21:28)

And it is made pretty clear that Jesus considers his accusers here to be represented by the *second* son, who initially said Yes to Dad, but then failed to live up their promise. And the lowest of the low - in their estimation - says Jesus, are entering the Kingdom of heaven ahead of them.

Then the second, more complex parable, concerning the tenants trying to take possession of a vineyard from an absentee landlord:

"Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. ..."

(Matthew 21:33)

These tenants *kill* the son, when he comes, I hope you remember. Very topical, with what these chief priests and all will be plotting within the next few days. But Jesus' point hits home.

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them.

(Matthew 21:45)

And yet Jesus is still not done in this response to their earlier accusations. So chapter 22 starts off ...

And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, ...

(Matthew 22:1)

And Jesus answered and spake unto them again by parables, and said,

...

(Matthew 22:1 KJV)

The KJV there is more literal. This is a third *answer*, as **Jesus' final twist in this set of parables shows that proud "acceptance" of grace is still another form of rejection.**

The empty hall (1-6)

Deserved retribution (7)

The filled hall (8-10)

Surprising rejection (11-14)

- **The empty hall (1-6)**

So look out for similarities as we go ... but don't be thrown too much if suddenly Jesus takes this new parable in a totally different direction from before. We've had a family scene before, a man with two sons, and then a work situation, a landlord and tenants. Now we go to the top of the social scale.

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king ... "

(Matthew 22:2)

And it is time for a big celebration. A **royal wedding** is in the offing.

"... a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, ..."

(Matthew 22:2)

And of course you don't just turn up at something like that. These dos are by invitation only. And **invitations** had already been sent out, this implies: there are a "those who were invited" - this could have been translated "those who *had been* invited". Only in this culture, the *exact* time and details of the wedding ceremonials weren't quite as rigidly fixed as they are in our society. You make a general kind of commitment to attend ... and, if this is the king you're answering to, you would be well advised to make sure that when the precise details *are* circulated, you give it top priority. You more than just pencil it into your diary. Only, curiously ... people *didn't*.

"... and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come."

(Matthew 22:3)

And you'd think this was going to provoke the king ... but ... apparently not, or not yet. So this is like the previous parable, then? The landowner who did not immediately evict his tenants, right? They are given another chance here, too.

“Again he sent other servants, saying, ‘Tell those who are invited, “See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.”’

(Matthew 22:4)

We’re getting into the vaguely surreal here already, I think. I mean, for just how long are you going to keep all the meat ready and steaming hot? People had definitely better get a move on now! Can’t have all that stuff going to waste! Or, even worse, insulting the king! But they *do*. This next phrase really means “they couldn’t be bothered”.

“But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, ...”

(Matthew 22:5)

It is as if it all just sails clean over their heads. The most important civic or national event of the year, and they just don’t care. I guess it’s a bit like me and the **Strictly** final. Only this is the *king* we’re talking about. And now, look, it’s like that previous parable again!

“... while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them.”

(Matthew 22:6)

This is just ridiculous. Imagine the scene. The big **feast** all set up, the various chefs poised waiting to **carve**, the servants standing to attention with their trays of **appetisers** and drinks. The doors are opened ... but there’s nobody waiting to come in. The hall is empty.

- **Deserved retribution (7)**

Now maybe you are expecting something about the king’s son, on the basis of the previous parable. Only the son really doesn’t feature in this one at all, other than as part of the setting for why there is a feast at all. So we have Jesus only as the narrator of the story, rather than as perhaps one of the characters in it, this time. Which means that probably the king’s next action comes into play rather sooner than we had expected.

“The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.”

(Matthew 22:7)

Just looking at this nowadays, you’d have to say that this is an entirely disproportionate response. To which I’d probably say Yes and No.

So you have to bear in mind that this is the response of a king to what really has to be taken as a calculated insult. These people know how things work.

Ignoring a royal command to attend is already pretty serious stuff. But for some to take things further, abusing and even killing the messengers ... these are *the king's* messengers, so you can see why that's treated as not just murder, but treason. In this parable, the retribution comes *now* and in full force.

And personally, I think I see here something of a prophecy from Jesus. Remember he has already issued a warning to the people of Israel, in that previous parable, too:

"Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits."

(Matthew 21:43)

And we might be getting some hint here of precisely what would happen when that "taking away" happens.

"The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city."

(Matthew 22:7)

Forty years later, when the Romans invaded Jerusalem a final time, it was said that at the conclusion of that siege, there were a million people - I thought I had read, though it sounds like a ridiculously large number - confined within the city, and butchered there. The city itself wasn't burned, but the temple was.

And that's a huge and scary reminder to not trifle with God. When he commands our attendance, when he sends his son into this world, rejection of all of that is serious. When you see this parable, warning the Jewish nation of what will inevitably follow if they reject their Messiah, as part of the times of relative ignorance, times before the resurrection of that slain Messiah proved to the whole world that he was indeed precisely what and who he said ... then what do you make of *this* commandment, and how much more dangerous it will be to reject *this*?

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

(Acts 17:30-31)

Folks, if the sovereign of the whole universe demands your attendance at the enthronement of his one and only Son, and you *cannot be bothered* ... shouldn't we take to heart the message of the first half of this parable we're looking at today?

"The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city."

(Matthew 22:7)

If that was the fate to come for *his own people* ...

... how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

(Hebrews 2:3)

Folks, let us heed the warning of the deserved retribution for the empty hall. But ... the hall *does* get filled. Jesus' parable is not yet complete. There are a few more twists and turns along this **track**. The king speaks again.

- **The filled hall (8-10)**

“Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.’

(Matthew 22:8-9)

When you come to this bit, though, you realise that Jesus has probably pressed the **pause button** on the parable. It would take a while to send out the troops and destroy a city ... during which time the banquet would surely have grown cold and unappetising. So I think the second section has shown us *first* the consequences of that initial rejection, and we *now* back-track to pick up the events of the day of the feast. Or maybe this was a feast that went on - as a royal occasion like this might have, in those days - for quite a few days. That could be another way to take it.

And there is, by the way, another parable which runs along these lines, when the king sends out two waves of servants, the second of which are told to go to the side roads and the back streets, and the hedges and ditches, and to *compel* people to attend. It's a different parable, and Jesus obviously does re-use and customise his material in different ways, on different occasions, for different audiences. But in this version, told on this occasion, the servants simply go out the once to the places where people typically congregated, with invitations for the previously uninvited.

If the previously invited people were the Jews, that would imply Gentiles, surely? This is *not* going to make the Jewish leaders any the happier, when they think this through and work out the implications!

But what happens next is very simply described. People are brought in from the nearby thoroughfares, the 1st-century equivalent of the shopping centres. No vetting. No criminal checks, and admission only to those of demonstrated unblemished character. All sorts.

And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests.

(Matthew 22:10)

End of story, you might think. *Happy* ending of story. It could have been. But Jesus has one final **twist of the track** - or **sting in the tail**, you could say - before

he brings this to a close. He does *not* leave us smiling at the rosy glow of the **sunset**, with everyone living happily ever after.

There is still the other side of the coin that we need to see. There are some who failed to receive the Messiah when he came. But there are some who will appear to accept him ... and yet they will refuse to be changed by him. They, too, do not realise their need of him. So the story will conclude with one further ...

- **Surprising rejection (11-14)**

It doesn't start so grimly. The king, you would have thought, is now satisfied. His hall *has* been filled. His son's marriage *will* be celebrated appropriately - even if not by the originally expected set of guests. He enters the celebrations to savour the moment.

"But when the king came in to look at the guests, ..."

(Matthew 22:11)

And here we need to assume a bit of background. I've heard it stated as if it was a well-known fact, but the books that I've read this week haven't seemed able to point to a clear historical precedent for this. So I think it's merely a reasonable assumption that will make sense of what follows.

It's a bit like the argument for **school uniforms**. One of the main lines is that it brings all the youngsters in at the same level. The kids from better-off families don't arrive at school wearing flashier clothes than those whose families are less affluent. The intention is to take that boasting, that competition - or that humiliation - out of the equation. I know it's not that simple, and that school uniforms still come with a cost implication. But you see the principle, I hope, here in this wedding feast.

The wedding, despite the way it's pitched nowadays - to make sure the **bride** spends a ridiculous amount on her clothes, I might a bit cynically say - is not just *her* day. Back in Jesus' day, it's going to be a whole lot more about the *bridegroom* - and that needs to be applied in our theology, when we read about in the Bible about the church being "the bride of Christ" - or we will end up looking in the wrong direction.

But this feast was not going to be an opportunity for the better-off guests to flaunt their wealth in their specially new-bought or hired outfits. It is not going to be a time when the impoverished will feel ashamed that their best clothes are tattier than the stuff their richer neighbours wouldn't even put out for a charity shop. It's not just that the **bridesmaids** will all appear in matching dresses. *Everyone* will have a wedding garment provided, at the generous host's expense.

And yet, as the king emerges and starts to circulate among the guests, something strikes his eye. He cannot avoid noticing that one particular person **stands out**.

"... he saw there a man who had no wedding garment."

(Matthew 22:11)

This might seem something trivial to you and me nowadays. To have rejected the king's invitation ... to have killed his messengers ... *that* was serious. Can't *this* minor infraction of the dress code be ignored on this occasion?

But that very oddness is calculated to make us *think* about all of this. And I reckon it takes us back to Isaiah 55. If we think this is something trivial to overlook, Jesus says that there is a rather different facet to this that we do not so easily grasp.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD.

(Isaiah 55:8)

The guy in his own clothes is also insulting God, but in a different way. He has accepted the king's invitation, but on his own terms. He thinks he does not need the king's generosity in the provision of clothing. It is actually just a different way of saying that he does not need grace. His clothes are quite sufficient in which to stand before the king.

He is just like us, if we think that our doing our best is going to be good enough for God.

If doing church often enough is going to be good enough for God.

If giving enough money and even *time* for some good cause is going to make us good enough for God.

If being a loving parent, or a good husband or wife, or an obedient child or a dedicated worker, or a passionate advocate of human rights or campaigner against climate change or plastic pollution, will make us acceptable to God.

Folks, in all of these things, all of which can be really, truly, sincerely good ... what is there to cover our sins before God? If all we can say, at best, is that we have done what God has required from us ...

“So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’”

(Luke 17:10)

... what about those various times when we *haven't*? What about those times when we have thought and maybe even done things that we have to admit are pretty low, mean, foul and despicable? What's going to cover *those*? That's why we sing here, from time to time

*What can wash away my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus?*

Or a less modern song

*Jesus, thy blood and righteousness
My beauty is, my glorious dress*

...
*Even then shall this be all my plea
Jesus hath lived and died for me*

That, I think, is what the king asks. *Is there some mistake here, some oversight that could be easily corrected?*

“And he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’”

(Matthew 22:12)

But there is not even a stammered answer. The word is literally that it's as if he were gagged.

“And he was speechless.”

(Matthew 22:12)

Folks, can I ask you, what's going to cover your sins, if not the blood of Christ? You can claim that you haven't sinned. You can claim that you do not recognise the authority of Almighty God to call you into his dock and pose this question. Or you can claim that you're actually quite a decent human being in your own right, and you don't really *need* this spiritual leg-up.

But I can assure you that if any of those are answers going through your head right now, then when you *do* stand before God, just like this one man in the crowd of the wedding feast, you will not have a word to answer, or a leg to stand on.

If you're thinking right now that you really did not realise that you needed this ... well, now is the time to ask for that garment of righteousness. The king has not yet pronounced his final words. Come and speak to me afterwards, and I'll be delighted to explain this good news of Jesus to you.

But Jesus does not leave his story suspended at this point. His final words do get spoken, and they are an awful warning. How literally we are meant to take them, I really don't know for sure. But we cannot avoid hearing them as almost unimaginably serious. Whatever it actually is, we do not want to experience this darkness!

“Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

(Matthew 22:13)

And Jesus concludes with a few more words that really seem to sum up the whole of this section in Matthew's gospel, as well as this third parable:

“For many are called, but few are chosen.”

(Matthew 22:14)

The Jewish nation were invited to the feast, but, by and large, on that national level, they chose to turn down that invitation.

But there are more people who have been invited. *Many* are called, in that sense. But not all will enjoy the banquet. And one of the most deadly things that will prevent you from enjoying that banquet is thinking that it is something that you deserve already. Saying, in essence, that you're happy to have Jesus Christ as your example, maybe, your inspiration for living ... but you do not need him as your saviour.

Folks, the invitations to that banquet are still out. The bread and wine on the table here are a kind of pointer, a kind of visual aid, reminding us of it. They help us to say to God, for the first time, or for the n'th time,

*This is all I need
This is all I plead
That his blood was shed for me*

I need this covering, this garment, if I am going to be able to enter into that wedding feast.

We have another picture in Scripture, that we read earlier on this morning, and with which we will now finish this part of the service. Revelation, that book filled with picture language that is meant to stir us deep down - even if we can't necessarily put our finger on specifics of history past or history future that are unambiguously what it's talking about.

But history, it tells us, will be concluded in a wedding feast - to which, by the looks of it, all believers in Jesus Christ are collectively called and invited as "the bride of Christ". And as that day approaches ... and when it finally arrives ... heaven is all a-buzz.

Revelation 21:1-5

Revelation 19:6-9

Folks, these *are* the true words of God. Let us rejoice and exult, and give him the glory ... and continue to make ourselves ready, day by day, this week ahead of us.

Simply receive all God needs to give you