

28th Sunday of Ordinary Time 2017

Fr Peter Groves

Matthew 22.1-14

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the marriage feast; but they would not come." Matthew 22.2-3

The parable of the wedding feast which we heard in our gospel reading is among the strangest in that strange collection of teachings which we call the parables of Jesus. Nothing in the story seems to be quite right. No doubt, all over Oxford this morning and this evening, preachers will be comparing the man who is found at that banquet without a wedding garment to the Oxford newcomer's fear of turning up to dinner or matriculation or whatever it is without one's academic gown. But that triviality, so important for Oxford's many Pharisees, myself included, is nothing when set against the fate of Jesus' interloper. It's an odd sort of wedding reception at which the badly dressed guest is bound hand and foot and cast into the outer darkness.

And it is an odd sort of wedding reception. Those who have been invited, refuse to come. The wording here is quite careful, and the language chosen makes it clear that the invitations are not only going out at this late juncture. Those who have been invited, have been invited some time ago. Since they are now being sent for, we must assume that they expressed their intention of coming. They are not caught on the hop by last minute arrangements, they have known of the imminent event for a long time. Their refusal is thus the more brazen, and their excuse entirely lacking.

The King is extremely persistent. In the face of this appalling failure of good manners, and the selfish disregard for his efforts which it betrays, he does not write his guests off. He sends more servants to plead with them: look, I have prepared my feast, the oxen and the fatted calves are killed, everything is ready. Come and join in. But no. Implausible mutterings about farms and businesses emanate from a few, while the worst of the invitees respond with anger and even violence. One has to wonder a little about why these people were invited in the first place.

And so we see the King's fury. He responds to the violence with violence of his own. And then he sends out even more servants to the highways and byways and has them call in all sorts of people whom he doesn't know, filling up his banqueting hall with good and bad alike. The wedding feast is full up, but just when we think that all is at last well, the poor chap who has forgotten his tail coat is dragged out by his heels and kicked into the gutter. Even at weddings in my home county of Essex, we don't behave like that.

Now there are various pious and predictable things one could say about the use of this image to illustrate the Kingdom of Heaven of which Jesus is preaching. We have been told at the end of the previous chapter, with its multiple references to the Lord's vineyard and the disobedience of those charged with working there, that the Pharisees recognized themselves as the target of Jesus' parables, and resolved to try to silence him. But however well we think we know Matthew's gospel, there is no safe place from which we can observe these events unmolested by their implications. For either we too are the subject of this story, and hence take the role of the Pharisees

in our attitude to the kingdom, or we are the uninvited, the ragged and unwashed interlopers hauled in from the streets to a new and dangerous situation, one where we will be required to account for ourselves, to be clothed in our wedding garment, to accept that the invitation to the Kingdom feast, however strange, however sudden, comes with the responsibility of response. It is not good enough just to be there. We have to enter into the life of the Kingdom, we have to put on the garments of righteousness and love or risk being booted out.

Which would we rather be? The respectable people in this story, at least to begin with, are the objects of the initial invitation. Surely we would expect to be among them? If we are not part of this first group, we are identifying ourselves with the overlooked, the marginalized, the neediest and the most shocking members of the community God calls together. How many of us can honestly say that such an identification is appropriate? Here we are, in this wonderful chapel, in comfortable clothes, enjoying our glorious liturgy, having stepped over the desperate and the drunk and the heroine

filled homeless in order to get here. We can fool ourselves, but we cannot fool God.

And yet, of course, we are actually here. We haven't refused to come. So we are, in that sense, those who are called out of judgement and alarm, those to whom God gives the chance to join in, those who fill up the banquet hall with our wrongs and our rights, our good and our bad, our efforts and our failures and our ambivalence and our certainties and our selfishness and our insecurity and our strangely persistent desire to do better. We are here, God has called us in, and will call us to account.

But he will call us to account only because he has already called us in. And the purpose of a feast is to be fed. God will call us and nourish us and feed us upon the body and blood of his son in the day to day miracle that we call the eucharist, the act of communion, of sharing, not simply with one another but with the love which gives us life. God will call us to something so infinitely beyond ourselves that without that nourishment we have no possibility of avoiding expulsion, no chance to dress properly for the feast of the Kingdom. But that

nourishment is not lacking. God's call to us is real, and his love does more than invite. We are compelled by the teaching of Jesus to live for God and neighbor, to wish and hope and pray that we are worthy of the life for which he feeds us. This is a high calling. And, whether or not we want to accept it, this calling is yours and mine.