

Lord God of creation, by your Spirit enable us to acknowledge the King's son and enjoy the party . Amen.

- *'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.'*
- We've all been to excruciatingly awful wedding receptions but this one must surely take the biscuit!
- Perhaps the host had a bit of a reputation as a boring 'father of the groom' speaker? A pompous ass maybe? Or perhaps just so entirely unpredictable and irascible so that he might pick a fight?
- Whatever it was, the invited guests started to make excuses. "Of course, I'd love to come, but it's harvest time and we'll be really hectic on the farm. Please will you tell my Lord the King, I can't be there?"
- Others weren't nearly as polite. "What the boring old King and his tedious son? I pay him my taxes, but I'm not doing this. I've got much better ways of spending a precious Saturday afternoon."
- Still others became aggressive. Scuffles broke out when the hapless servants pleaded with them to come to the party. Some were injured; a few were even killed. *'the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them.'*
  - What sort of society does that? Well, maybe the sort that allows black people to die at the hands of police or repels homeless refugees at the borders of their country forcing some of them to try desperate means and die in small inflatable dinghies in the Channel in the attempt?
- It's all very unsettling and not the parable we want to hear!
- And what of the King? He's clearly hurt and disappointed to begin with. He rather touchingly attempts to persuade the reluctant potential guests with promises of a great feast. *'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 later he loses his temper and exacts revenge. *'He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.'*
- Before we go any further, imagine you were a devout Jew, listening in scandalised horror to Jesus telling this parable 2 000 years ago. You would have picked up on two things. First, it was a common criticism of their Jewish forebears, that whenever a prophet arose, the Jews maligned them and sometimes killed them. Jesus mentions this explicitly in the very next chapter of Matthew. For the Jews, the story of the King's servants being killed was an arrow that would have shot home. They would have realised he was talking about them. They were the guests who refused to come to the King's wedding feast for his son. They were the ones who were killing the servants. They were the ones whose city Jesus was condemning.
- And second, you would have known the historical truth of this, just 30 years later, before Matthew wrote his Gospel, as Jerusalem was sacked by the cold might of Rome, and their beloved temple, destroyed.
- Perhaps, if you put yourself in Jewish shoes, you can feel the aggressive challenge of Jesus to your way of life and the chilling truth of what will happen if you pursue it?
- But back to the parable. Back to today. The King still has a wedding feast to populate. The servants were sent to invite whoever they might find, and not to be too picky, just so the party could go ahead. *'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.'*
- This is all going rather better for us. For the traditional explanation, and one which the Church was keen on, for obvious reasons, was that we are these later guests. The Jews, who did not respond to the message of Jesus were dispensed with and the Gentiles entered the Kingdom. . We are at the feast. *'Pass the roast beef if you will, and I wouldn't mind another glass of that claret.'* We can rejoice in our own self-righteousness, that Jesus has died for us, and we have had the sense to respond to the call. We are in the Kingdom. It's a real shame that the others rejected the opportunity but there we are. Any more profiteroles?
- And that would be great, if rather self-obsessed if that were the end of the story. But sadly, Matthew tacks on an ending, which rather destroys this pleasant bubble of comfort and joy. For one of us, is not wearing their wedding clothes. And the King is wandering up and down and has noticed.
  - POINT 'You, how did you get in? Why are you not dressed correctly?'
  - Why didn't Matthew edit this bit out? It makes a parable that clearly supports our point of view, our Christian faith, suddenly much more disturbing!

- *“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.”* Does this parable offer an image of God that is cruel, deficient and, in the final analysis, unchristian? It’s all very disturbing!
- But actually life for the Jews 2 000 years ago was pretty disturbing with the might of Rome glowering on the horizon. They Jews tried to ignore the threat. They tried to trust in God to protect them but it didn’t happen. They too thought they had got it right, but God didn’t appear to be blessing them. Or perhaps he was but not in the way they were expecting. They were not at all sure they wanted to be blessed with Jesus. He was just too disruptive of their way of life and their comfortable assumptions about themselves as God’s chosen people.
- And life today is pretty disturbing too, with the might of climate change glowering on the horizon. Society largely tries to ignore the threat no matter how many David Attenborough films they watch or how many Extinction Rebellion protestors clamber onto the roof of tube trains. We try to trust in God to protect us but are afflicted with a pandemic which is very disturbing to our chosen way of life and God doesn’t appear to be blessing us. Or maybe he is, but not in the way we are expecting?
- And as I’ve already said just once or twice, it’s all very disturbing!
- So what are we to do with this parable, which seems to preaching disturbance to disturbed people?
- One possibility is to ignore it, to refuse our invitation to the banquet in the Kingdom of God, like those first hapless people on the original guest list? And actually that’s the option chosen by the vast majority of people from Government leaders to individuals all over the world.
  - As a result of this parable, some would consign these poor unfortunates to hell and destruction.
  - However I remain to be convinced that Jesus was doing that. For remember, the sentence *‘He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.’* was a pointer to the Jews of the forthcoming destruction of Jerusalem. Something very physical but not necessarily eternal in its meaning.
- Another possibility is just to discount it. Jesus having an off-day. Let’s go back to the Good Shepherd story instead. That’s much more comforting in this time when everything else is turned upside down. After all, we are in the banquet. What can we possibly have to worry about?
  - But actually, as we have also said there was quite a lot to worry about, 2 000 years ago, and if anything, there’s even more today.
- So maybe the lack of a wedding garment means the guest was retreating from the world and so immersed in the party that heaven and earth were separating rather than uniting? Not allowing the values of heaven to influence the world in which we live? The sort of Christian whose faith has no effect on the life they lead? And heaven knows, if the planet is going to escape wide-scale species destruction then the world needs Christians whose faith affects their lifestyle. And heaven knows, if you and I are going to cope with the rigours of the next 20 years, let alone the next 9 months, our faith is going to have to be pretty crucial to us and the way we live our lives. For every other form of security is being called into question. Otherwise there really will be *“weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*!
- So just before the climax of this sermon, let me ask you a question. Who is the central character of the parable, without whom there would be no wedding feast, no party?
- The answer is not the King. For the wedding could still go ahead without him. No, the central character is the Son. You can’t have a wedding feast without a wedding and you can’t have a wedding without a groom.
- So if you and I are feeling a little wearied at the prospect of another 9 months of semi-lockdown, or anxious about the continuing threat of contracting Corona, maybe the parable is telling us to keep our focus on the Son and his feast. To bring the banquet into the presence and accept the hospitality of the King. To remember that we are not outside in the cold but inside at the party and to live our lives accordingly, without worry or fear, without that feeling of heaviness that comes from the knowledge of another winter where we can’t shake hands or hug our neighbour.
- And if that’s easier said than done, then remember actually the next 20 years are even more dangerous as climate change takes hold. It seems to be urging us to discover that in order to live in the Kingdom of God, to

live as if our life was a party, it's important to live coherently valuable lives where our actions betray our faith and show that we recognise that the world is God's creation rather than our own possession and to treat it as such.

- Perhaps it's only when we have all given up our cars that we will discover the joy that comes from not rushing around to fill appointments? Perhaps it's only when we have not got enough plastic waste to fill a bin even once a year that we will discover that God created a world in which there is no waste, it's only sinful humans who throw things away? Perhaps it's only when all the street lights have gone out because of the huge recession that we will learn to appreciate the stars? Perhaps it's only when our phones have died and we can't afford a new one that we will begin to teach our children the names of trees again and take them outside to feel the bark?
- Come to wedding feast. But is this the sort of feast to which you would accept an invitation?