

Christ's Wedding Feast Matthew 22:1-14

Who doesn't like going to wedding receptions? Who doesn't like the music and dancing, and, of course, the great food and drink? Whether we sit down to a banquet after the ceremony, like many couples prefer to do up North, or whether we mingle around bountiful buffet tables in our magnolia-scented Southern gardens, we all enjoy having the opportunity to congratulate the groom and extend our best wishes to the bride while having fun with so many friends. So, according to the story Jesus tells in today's passage, when the king made up his guest list, he was just sure that everyone he invited would want to attend the wedding of his son.

And why shouldn't everyone want to come to the wedding Jesus is really talking about, the union of Christ and His Church that John refers to in the Revelation as "the marriage supper of the Lamb" (19:9)? After all, the folks who first heard Jesus tell this story knew that God's prophets throughout the Old Testament had spoken of God's people as His bride. "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, So your God will rejoice over you" – that's what Isaiah said (62:5). "I will betroth you to Me forever in righteousness and justice, in lovingkindness and mercy; I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, and you shall know the Lord" – that's what Hosea said (from Hosea 2:19-20).

And of course such wedding imagery continues into the New Testament, and not only in the Revelation. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul points to the love of Christ for His Church as a model for the kind of self-sacrificial love that husbands should have for their wives. Paul points out that Christ "loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:25-27).

So, if we look forward at weddings to the sumptuous fare on our buffet tables, how much more should we long for the Bridegroom Who says, "I am the bread of life, the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he shall live forever" (John 6:48, 51)? For Jesus has indeed given up His flesh and His blood for His bride so that we might be washed clean of our sin, made pure and holy.

And if we enjoy the variety of drinks we can sample at our receptions, how much more should we long for the One Who promises, "Everyone who drinks of this water shall thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life" (John 4:13-14)? For Jesus promises to fill us with His Holy Spirit, to live not only with us but within us forever.

And we all know that it's a lot of work to put on a wedding. After months of planning and preparation, and weeks of feverish effort, it's a big relief for everyone to relax and enjoy the reception. But how much more should we long for the One Who says, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

Yes, if we enjoy gathering to celebrate the lifelong, exclusive commitment that a husband and wife make to each other, how much more should we rejoice in the amazing offer that Christ makes to all who would trust in Him? How much more should we rejoice that the Bridegroom of the Church has laid down His life for His bride, going to the cross to pay the sin debt for all who would trust in Him? How much more should we celebrate His resurrection from the dead which guarantees His people not only

eternal life with Him forever, but new, Spirit-filled resurrection life now, life that is free from bondage to sin and death?

Oh yes. As we read this morning in Psalm 23, even though our enemies may continue to lurk outside the banquet hall, the Lord has set a table before all His people. He has anointed our heads with oil, setting us apart for Himself. He has filled our cup of mercy and blessing, our cup of salvation and safety, our cup of rejoicing and rest to the point where it overflows. So, what greater motivation could anyone need to come to Christ? Who wouldn't want to be invited to such a marriage supper?

Um, the chief priests and elders and Pharisees, that's who. In fact, verse 15 makes clear that, right after Jesus told this story, right after Jesus welcomed everyone to the wedding feast of the Lamb, the Pharisees started planning how they might trap Him, how they might bring about His downfall. As part of God's Old Testament people, they had indeed been among the first to be invited to the feast – but like the prospective guests in verses 3 and 5 they refused to come. They were so convinced of their own ability to earn their own salvation through their own righteousness, that they saw no need to accept Jesus' gracious invitation. As Jesus soberly observes, "Many are called, but few are chosen."

And the sad truth is that there are so many people all around us today who continue to reject Jesus for similar reasons. Some who insist that they are followers of the Lord nevertheless seek solace in legalism, believing that because they do certain things or avoid other behaviors, somehow God will be pleased with them. Yes, many of us are tempted to feel better about ourselves when we look down on those who commit flagrant, socially unacceptable sins: "Well, I may not be perfect, but I'm not a murderer or a thief or a crackhead or a prostitute! I'm no lazy no-account! I work hard for what I have. I try to provide for my family, and I even put a little in the offering plate at church." But if any of us could save ourselves simply by our own feeble efforts at respectability, why did Jesus need to go to the cross?

Of course others, like those Jesus describes in verse 5, are just too caught up with their farms and their merchandise (their businesses), with all their worldly affairs to think very much about their need to accept Jesus' invitation. So enthralled are they with the beauty and the wonder of God's creation, they forget their Creator. So focused are they on the pleasures of this life that they refuse to give glory to the One Who has given them such blessings. In short, they want to enjoy all the fun of the reception without coming to the wedding, all the beauty and bounty of God's love without entering into a relationship with Christ.

And then there are those who seem to accept Jesus' invitation, those who say they want to come to the marriage supper of the Lamb but at the same time refuse to leave their old rebellious ways behind. Sure, they love the idea of Christ's welcome and forgiveness. They may desire His blessings and His provision. They may even mouth the right words, professing their faith and confessing their sin. But they are simply treating their relationship with Christ as so much heavenly fire insurance. They are going through the motions of faith, but only so that they can go on doing as they please. They thus imagine that they can continue to live in sin but somehow escape its consequences, that they can be connected to Christ, the only source of life and light, while at the same time pushing Him away.

But just as the man in verse 11 refused to put on the appropriate clothes for the wedding feast, those who call themselves Christians but reject their need for repentance, their need not only to turn to Christ in faith but also to turn away from sin, well, they should expect no better treatment than those who openly defy Him. For if those who flagrantly reject His authority will be destroyed and have their city burned, those who attempt to presume upon His grace will eventually find themselves in the outer darkness. Excluded from the joy of the wedding feast, they will only find weeping and torment.

Remember, Jesus solemnly warns us that not everyone who hears the call of Christ turns out to be chosen, thus having a true relationship with Him.

But just because some refuse to come to the marriage supper, let's not forget the marvel that Jesus insists on having the wedding anyway. And He insists on inviting all kinds of guests – not just His Old Testament people, the Jews, but also Gentiles like most of us. After all, according to Jesus' story, the king was so determined to fill up His banquet hall that he sent his servants out into the highways, inviting everyone to come to his son's wedding. Just so, the Lord sent out the twelve apostles, first to the Jews, but then as far south as Ethiopia, as far east as India and as far West as Rome. And the Lord's messengers continue to range far and wide with the good news of His welcome and grace so that one day, people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation will indeed sit down together at the marriage feast of the Lamb.

But we find what is perhaps the best news of all in verse 10 – that those who were welcomed to the king's feast were both bad and good. That means that God's grace doesn't just extend across all racial and ethnic boundaries, to both Jews and Gentiles. It also means that God's grace is not somehow conditional upon our deserving it. The good news is that Christ's sacrifice is sufficient not only for "good people" like Paul's disciple Timothy, who grew up in a home where his Jewish mother and grandmother faithfully taught him the Old Testament Scriptures. No, God's grace was also for "bad boys" like Matthew the tax collector, and for Peter who denied Jesus three times, and, come to think of it, for all the rest of Jesus' disciples who ran off and left Him in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Yes, the good news is that no matter what any of us may have done or left undone, God's grace in the sacrifice of Christ is sufficient to cover all of your sins and all of mine. The good news is that even when we Christians are not nearly as faithful as we should be, even when we are a whole lot more like those Pharisees or chief priests than we would like to admit, even when we are focused more on our own desires than on the glory of Christ, even when we find ourselves distracted by all the daily pressures of life, even when we are drawn away from prayer and study and communion with Christ by all the things we are so sure are so important for us to do, still our king calls us.

Still our king invites us to repent, to trust more consistently and completely in Christ our Savior. Still He wraps us in the robe of Christ's righteousness and calls us to come rejoice with Him, to come celebrate His promises of welcome and love, of provision and rest. Still He invites us to the marriage supper of the Lamb.

So today, let us not be satisfied with simply hearing God's calling, God's invitation. Let us turn to Him, trusting Him with all our hearts. Let us repent of our sin and receive by faith His amazing grace. And let us look forward with confident joy to Christ's wedding feast.