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It's the last Sunday of 2018! What a year it has been for us as a Church! Seven months ago, on 23 May we moved out of our church home of 53 years into this temporary place, as we wait for a new building across the precinct, the foundations of which are already cast!

It is a good time to look back and give thanks to God for His foresight and oversight of the project.

Whilst the new church building demands our attention, let's remind ourselves, ***the Church is people, and people are the Church.***

Would you remember the slogan "*Membership has its Privileges*"? Back in the 'Nineties, it was American Express' marketing banner: if you paid the annual fee for an Amex card, you enjoyed its benefits.

Church membership has its privileges too, but how we approach these privileges is very important.

We could approach church membership as an exclusive "invitation only" club. Two disciples of Jesus made this mistake. The mother of James and John came to Jesus with both her sons. When asked what she wanted, she said, ***When you become King in your Kingdom, please let my two sons sit in places of honour next to you, one on your right and the other on your left.***

What a huge miscalculation!

When Jesus called James and John to leave their fishing nets and follow Him, they may well have thought they were invited to regal privilege: let's make a bid for the seats on either side of Jesus when He is king, before anyone else does, but let's get mummy to ask Him, because Jesus has a soft corner for widows!

If you were a person in authority, would you appoint two of your first line Managers who called their mothers to plead their case for appointment?

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The incident leads us into the passage I would like us to consider, Matthew 22, focussing on the last line of the parable, verse 14 which reads, ***For many are called, but few are chosen.***

Jesus is an excellent story-teller and His parables have the remarkable ability of engaging our imagination and challenging our assumptions, not to endorse **our** understanding of God, ourselves, and other people. He drew us into His stories for us to reexamine **our** most cherished (sometimes misguided and at times mistaken) convictions about matters of eternal importance. Jesus' parables unsettle us rather than reassure us.

The parable of the wedding feast in Matthew 22 does just that. It describes the kingdom of heaven through the telling of the story of a king who gave a wedding feast for his son (22:2). The wedding feast is an important image in the Bible; it allows us to imagine the day when God will gather all His redeemed, to enjoy His presence in complete holiness and joy.

By the king's order, banquet invitations go out. The king's servants are *"sent to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come"* (22:3). They offer all kinds of excuses and mistreat the servants, and are punished by the King (22:5–7), who then dispatches his servants: *"Go to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast, as many as you find"* (22:9).

Jesus is describing God's offer, first to the Jews, then to the Gentiles, to bless the world with the Gospel, the Good News that all is not lost, that He will restore this world and all who bless those whom He chooses, to its sin-less state. The Jewish nation, however, had decisively rejected God's offer to them through His prophets, so Jesus divulges the resulting judgment of God—the Roman armies would destroy Jerusalem in AD 70.

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But God's love is much greater than His anger.

The gospel is extended to Gentiles and results in *"the wedding hall ... filled with guests"* (22:10).

Then something unexpected happens.

As He mingled among His guests, the king discovers *"a man who had no wedding garment"*, he was, we understand, not dressed for the occasion (22:12). The man is at pains to explain why he has not dressed suitably, so the king orders he be *"bound hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness"* (22:13). Jesus ends by pronouncing the parable's punch line: **"For many are called, but few are chosen"** (22:14).

Two important words, **CALLED** and **CHOSEN**.

The word **CALLED**, runs through the parable:

- **"call** those *invited* (**called**) to the feast" (22:3).
- Jewish invitees are the **"called ones"** (22:4, 8).
- Servants are ordered to **"call"** the Gentiles (22:9).

God calls through his servants—**prophets** in the Old Testament, **ministers** in the New — anyone who will hear Him, to turn from their **own** ways of thinking about life and life hereafter, and believe the good news these servants proclaim. Anyone can refuse the offer, as many Jews did, but they are responsible for the consequences.

It is also possible to respond to God's call when not prepared. The *man who had no wedding garment*, does not belong at the feast because he has not prepared himself for it, and he is justly banished.

What then, is the *"wedding garment"* the man did not wear?

The *wedding garment* is the identity of belonging; it's not a uniform, nor a badge. It is the outward sign of a changed life. The King saw through the

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man, that he was an impostor, posing to having made the grade of a changed person, but on the inside, still the same. He wanted to be accepted where everyone was accepted, but without giving respect to the Host and all that He stood for.

The man wanted the benefits of privilege, without the responsibility of changing his ways. How many people do we know in positions of authority, who talk about doing things for the poor and under-privileged, but their own lives do not reflect that commitment? How many people do we know in positions of influence who encourage us to give to needy causes, but who will not dirty their hands in, or make a time commitment to the cause itself?

The King saw through the man, that he wanted the privilege of being in comfortable company, but he was not prepared to change his ways to be worthy of the privilege. Every one is called... ..

The second word of note in the parable is **CHOSEN**.

To understand **CHOSEN**, we must first rid ourselves of the popular understanding of the word, which is, a sign of *favouritism*. It's not!

In order to be **CHOSEN**, we first must **CHOOSE**. In order to be chosen for a job, we must choose to first apply for it, prepare for the interview and present ourselves in a manner acceptable to the interview panel! In order to be chosen by the one one we love, we must first choose to propose, then prepare how we will propose, and then make ourselves presentable to be accepted by the one we love!

The man who attended the wedding feast **CHOSE** not to dress for the occasion and was caught out by the King could see through his clothes, to his heart.

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In this parable, Jesus makes it perfectly clear, God will not force anyone into His Kingdom. His call, His invitation goes out to everyone. Many hear and accept, and many hear, but **choose** not to accept.

If God chose each one of us, and ordered us to do things in His kingdom, He would be no better than the Dictators of this world who decide what everyone does, how they think, and their role in society.

It is always encouraging to see people hear God's invitation to be part of His Church, and choose to respond accordingly. God then chooses them to participate in the life and activities of the Church, because **they first chose** to want to change and re-align their understanding of God, the purpose of life, the ministry to others.

As we welcome to the fellowship of this Church, we remind ourselves, we are part of the fellowship of the called, only because we have heard His call and have chosen to respond positively.

The Holy Spirit takes over and walks us through our mistakes in thought, word and deed, and prepares us to be an active member in the Church, the head of which is Jesus the Christ!

Not everyone can pray and sing and lead worship, but God has given everyone a gift to bless the Church.

Its for each of us to prayerfully discover this gift and use it appropriately for the glory of God!

AMEN.