

## *BIBLICAL REFLECTION*

*for Trinity 18 (11 October)*

*Matthew 22:1-14*

When my Mum died two years ago, you may recall that I set a very strict dress code for her funeral. I personally dislike this modern trend of turning a time of sadness into a colour-filled 'party', and made it a condition that dark mourning – and preferably black – was to be worn; and the ladies present should wear a hat! I am pleased to remember – and am grateful for it – that 99% obeyed. What I did not think of doing was having those who failed to organise their wardrobe properly bound hand and foot, and thrown into the outer darkness. There was, after all, enough weeping going on on that day, without consigning others to a world of perpetual gnashing of teeth.

Matthew's rendition of Jesus' parable in today's reading – a variation on Luke's style, yet much more graphic – seems terribly hard on that poor man who turned up at the wedding, only to be punished for wearing the wrong clothes. Clearly, a major wardrobe malfunction that seemed to have unprecedented repercussions. Whatever else this extract of scripture was about gets lost in our focus and concern for this unfortunate person.

Having said that, I would quite like absolute power to operate a Fashion Police-force in our modern world – and if I was to have such power, some of you need to be very scared! Far too many people leave the privacy of their own homes these days without doing a mirror check! My force – which would have powers such as Matthew alludes to – would soon clear the streets of the more unsavoury sights. But if I was to do that, how do I really know what sort of person lay behind their wardrobe choice? How could I second-guess what kind of individual they were? How fair would it be to prejudge what qualities or endearing characteristics they might have just by virtue of their poor taste in attire and appearance? The man in Matthew's gospel had responded to a kind invitation, but did he get the small-print that went with it? We are reminded so much by this incident – and the whole "Wedding" story – that life is not always straightforward, and that there are consequences for our actions.

All of us are potentially represented by this wedding guest. All of us can be seated at that table, responding to invite, yet not always understanding what is expected of us. All of us can make the mistake quoted. This wedding guest represents those who are called, those who are invited, those who are encouraged by the Kingship of God to share in the wonder that is faith with Him. As practising Christians, we are confident that we have indeed responded to the siren call of His Son, Jesus Christ, and now find ourselves counted among the guests at His perpetual wedding feast. It is a lovely sensation. We feel flattered to be asked. We feel privileged to have been set apart from the swathe of society that apparently has not been invited. We feel honoured. We are ready, knife and fork in hand, to tuck into the feast of renewed life that is in front of us. But wait, there is a tap on our shoulder – sorry, but you do not qualify to sit here. You are not wanted. You have not made an effort. And out the door we are put.

What on earth has happened there? How come we now do not have access to the feast; we do not have a place at the table; we are not included – what has seemingly gone wrong? Well, we have. We have 'gone wrong' as it were in the eyes of God. Our attitude, our approach, our

evidence – it has all gone wrong – and it has gone wrong because we have misunderstood the needs and hopes of the feast. We have possibly squandered the right to the invite. We have not committed to its small-print. We have put on the wrong clothes.

This poor wedding guest represents those who have, on the surface, bought into this whole 'religion' business but have failed to be genuine, to be loyal, to prioritise, to work for its good. The rejection and the inappropriate attire symbolise a dimension that strikes at the heart of so many Christian communities. It illustrates how fickle some people are – and it reminds the rest of us how swift God's reactions are when abused. If we want to remain at the wedding and enjoy the food, drink and ambience, we have to know how to behave and be.

The challenges in our modern day that govern the success or otherwise of our Christian witness are manifold. It is not easy at times to prioritise God, however well-intentioned we might be. We are bombarded by distraction; we are currently bombarded by virus! God is having a hard time at present as the churches of our land keep up with ever-changing expectations and restrictions. It would be far too easy to simply cancel the wedding in the first place, and dispense with its symbolic meal rather than struggle to find guests to attend. But to do that would be to undermine the very essence of goodness that is the Christian message: the essence of hope, of love, of support, of friendship, of allegiance, of power, of comfort. All those great experiences that we seek and absorb as part of our encounter over and over again – all those amazing sensations that bring us back to endless feasts and gatherings – all those opportunities when the intimacy of the moment overwhelms our very being. That is what is important, and that is why we are here. God is far too important to pay 'lip-service' to, and today's scripture sharpens our attention to remind us just how vital it is to remain focussed and genuine in our witness.

The characters in our extract today were not even on that infamous "B" list so many wedding couples have today – the people they only invite to the Evening 'Do', or put on 'Table 13' with the other 'odds-and-sods' at the main reception. The people in our extract came from wherever: they were gathered, they were collected, they were enticed, and each responded to the great invite of God to see and share the fabulous spread before them. And those that reacted positively, those that responded with zeal, those who realised the greatness of the occasion, those who acknowledged the privilege – to those came the beauty of the occasion. To all of us who are genuine in our reply to God's invitation will come the rich benefits of His care, love and protection, we can be totally assured of that.

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