

Matthew 22: 1-14

Isaiah 5: 1-7

Many are called, few are chosen

We are continuing to explore the lessons to be learnt from Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven; its upside down nature where we should expect the unexpected.

How the permanence of treasure in heaven is vastly superior to any treasure stored up here on earth and that authority is given to serve others; it's not about self serving.

Last week Jon placed Jesus' teaching in the temple a few days after his triumphal entry where he was bluntly rebuking the hypocrisy and self serving teaching of the Jewish religious leaders who challenged his authority.

That story immediately continues in Matthew with Jesus delivering a withering indictment of the Pharisees in what is known as the parable of the wicked tenants.

Now, given my 37 years in the Letting industry I could tell you a thing or two about wicked tenants, great, I thought. But Jon in his infinite wisdom reminded me to expect the unexpected, so I'm not talking about that parable

Instead I'm picking up the story immediately afterwards. Jesus is still speaking in the temple to and about the Jewish leadership but now goes further and tells them plainly that they many are called but few are chosen, and they contrary to what they believe, are not amongst the chosen.

In the parable, clearly "a certain king" refers to God the Father and the king's son, the bridegroom is Jesus Christ. The servants represent both the Old and New Testaments whilst the bride is us – God's church. But the focus of attention is not the marriage itself – it is the marriage feast and those invited.

Biblically speaking the feast symbolises the excellence, abundance and happiness that comes from being in fellowship with God. That is what is described so poetically in our psalm; "Ho everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come buy wine and milk without money and without price"

And the invited guests – well hopefully this will become clear.

Weddings! Don't you just love them? The overture to the wonderful symphony called married life.

Some people have asked Jane and me what makes our marriage so happy. I said going out to a restaurant twice a week; Jane agreed; a little candlelit dinner, soft music, a slow walk home. Me, going on a Tuesday, Jane on a Friday. As Jane reminded me only yesterday, I am living proof that a wife can take a joke.

And of course, just as in our story, integral to any wedding is the invite list. Who should be invited and how best to go about inviting them.

Today we are mostly likely to send written invites. Here's one I couldn't believe, but is available from [sliced cake.com](http://slicedcake.com)

Beautiful bride, handsome groom, booze, food, and bad dancing moves. You in or what?

And on the same site, there was an RSVP card which gave five possible responses to tick:

Gladly attend

Regretfully decline

Resentfully attend

Enthusiastically decline

Will come unless better invite received

Back to the parable. The invites are verbally delivered by servants.

The king sends out his first invitation to his chosen people but this is met with total indifference as if the recipients are far too busy wrapped up in doing their own thing. Strike one against the people of Israel.

So a second invitation is sent out, more precise and urgent than the first because everything is ready for the marriage celebration, yet the servants sent out in this round of invitations were no more successful than the first. Even worse, some of the servants are totally ignored, manhandled, abused or even murdered.

Think of the treatment meted out to the many prophets in the bible, not least Jesus' own cousin, John the Baptist. Strike two against the chosen people.

The King is enraged, but refuses to let this rejection defeat him and he sends out a third invitation. Bad news for those originally invited but good news for everyone else and all and sundry arrive in droves.

And knowing Jesus as we do, we don't have to stretch our imagination too far to identify who these others are and where they have come from; the underclass, the nobodies, every discard of society who either thought they had been forgotten or excluded from God's great plan and the wedding feast proceeds. Strike three. Your out.....Or at least we hear of one man being kicked out.

And, this being Jesus and this being a parable, that event is surrounded by mystery and uncertainty. The man gets the boot because he isn't wearing a wedding robe....so where did all those herded from the slums and off the streets not only get their robes, but find the time to put them on?

Why should this one man be thrown out because he didn't have the right thing to wear? Isn't that exactly the sort of social exclusion the gospel rejects?

Well, at one level, yes, it is...but as we now realise, that's not how parables work. Jesus is telling an unpalatable truth which the Pharisees cannot or will not accept...indeed as far as they are concerned it will be Jesus who will soon be bound, beaten and thrown out of their own party.

The explanation I like best is that this generous king not only provides the feast free for the wedding of his son and invites everyone to it, but also provides the beautiful festal robes for all to wear.

There is obviously time for everyone when they receive the invitation, no matter where they might be, to replace the street clothes they stand up in and put on the wedding clothes.

Biblically speaking, beautiful clothing indicates spiritual character developed by obedience to God. In Romans 13, St Paul speaks of clothing ourselves "with the Lord Jesus Christ".

The guests in our story symbolically discard their pride, rebellion and sinfulness and clothe themselves with the love, peace, humility and obedience of Christ.

In one stroke this gracious and loving king ensures not only the poor need not be ashamed of their rags but also the rich have no cause to be proud or boastful of their own attire.

All come in as equals, just as those vineyard workers did when given the same daily wage regardless of how long they had worked, in the parable of the compassionate owner from three weeks ago.

But one man pushes his way in without the wedding clothes. No doubt he thought his own were good enough, maybe even superior to what everyone else was wearing.

At my niece's wedding where everyone one was dressed in their hired or owned Sunday best, one punk rocker type with more rings through his nose than can be seen on the Olympic flag, and wearing torn jeans and a badly stained tee shirt stood out like the proverbial sore thumb.

Get the picture.....immediately eye catching, just like the man in the parable – and when he has no answer to the king’s question “how did you get in here without wedding clothes?” he’s bound hand and foot, thrown into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”.

Just in case you’re in any doubt, the outer darkness symbolizes hell and the weeping and gnashing of teeth stand in stark contrast to the new Jerusalem of Revelation 21 where every tear will be wiped away, and there will be no more death, no more mourning and no more pain....definitely no more gnashing of teeth

My niece’s punk rocker friend was treated a little bit less dramatically, but isn’t the punishment meted out in the parable ludicrously severe for just turning up improperly dressed? I don’t think so if you tease out the parable just a little bit more.

By scorning the host’s provision of the wedding clothes, he was in effect saying that he didn’t need any help; his best was good enough for the host. The king in the story has the man thrown out and God will do the same to anyone who relies on his own fancied goodness to gain entry into the Kingdom.

And so the meaning of the parable starts to become clear.

God will freely provide a feast fit for a king for all those who accept his invitation. The invitation is open to all but if you reject it, you will miss out on the party. If you think you can attend through your own merits and in your own strength and not through the grace and strength of Jesus, you will be thrown out!

Yes, the invitation is open to all - but it is not unconditional – and that’s what Jon meant last week when he said he wants Holy Trinity to be fully inclusive.

When the blind and the lame came to Jesus he didn’t just say “welcome, you’re all right as you are”. No he healed them. His love for them reached out to them *where* they were, but his love refused to let them stay *as* they were. He wanted their lives to be changed, to be transformed, to be in a position where they were ready, willing and able to accept God’s invitation.

The message is clear to me - here at Holy Trinity - all are welcome - in the knowledge that we are a journeying people being transformed by grace and the invitation is to change; to get to know Jesus more intimately, to become a true disciple of Christ to be in a position to accept God’s invitation. If we diminish, hide or lessen what and who we are we neither serve those invited, nor Christ.

Corporately we are the body of Christ; we are to be his bride. You don’t marry someone you can live with.... you marry someone you can’t live without, and that someone is Jesus Christ and it is up to us to help people attain a position to accept God’s invitation to his son’s wedding feast.

The parable closes with the words “many are called, few are chosen”. The Pharisees and the people of Israel considered themselves to be the chosen elite who would be the first to be called to God’s heavenly feast but they had been deaf to the gospel being preached by the prophets over the centuries; and they will be the last.

Jesus said many times “He who has ears to hear, let him hear”. Jesus is telling us that everyone, that includes me and you, have ears, but only a few are listening and responding.

Many hear the gospel but fail to notice the explicit command to respond to the invitation that is in Christ. Merely acknowledging the gospel or simply paying lip service to it isn’t enough. Only believing in Christ and living out the gospel will secure us a seat at that banquet table.

If you doubt what I say, just think for a moment about Judas Iscariot. He was one of the many called, but definitely not chosen.

Many are called, few are chosen.

If you received God's invitation today, how would you respond? Are you one of the many called or are you one of the few who are chosen?

Are you very comfortable in your own wedding clothes or are you ready to try on the offered wedding robe?

Maybe some of you have already started putting them on. Maybe not.

Many are called, few are chosen, but the invite goes out to all.

Well, now is the time to open the envelopes.

You in or what?