

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Matthew's parable of the wedding feast and the declined invitations (22:1-14) is the last of three successive parables of judgment (beginning in 21:28) against Israel, especially her leadership. There are obvious connections among the three parables. Each has an "authority figure" (father, landowner, and king respectively). "Sons" or "a son" appear in all three. The second and third parables share the two groups of slaves and the severe judgment against those who oppose the son.

In today's parable, the king represents God; the son, Jesus; and the wedding banquet, the time of divine-human celebration symbolized by the kingdom. The beautiful spousal imagery of the Lord (YHWH) and Israel (Hosea 2:19-20; Isaiah 54:4-8; 62:5) provides a rich, biblical backdrop. Today's story incorporates two favourite Old and New Testament images: a feast and a marriage.

Matthew has provided many allegorical traits to today's story, e.g. the burning of the city of the guests who refused the invitation (22:7), which corresponds to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD. It has similarities with the preceding parable of the tenants: the sending of two groups of servants (22:3, 4), the murder of the servants (22:6), the punishment of the murderers (22:7), and the entrance of a new group into a privileged situation of which the others had proven themselves unworthy (22:8-10). The parable ends with a section that is very peculiar to Matthew (22:11-14) which some take as a distinct parable on its own.

Matthew's parable appears in significantly different form in Luke 14:16-24. Today's story most likely comes from "Q," a hypothetical written source for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. "Q" (short for the German Quelle or "source") is defined as the "common" material found in Matthew and Luke but not in the Gospel of Mark. This ancient text supposedly contained the logia or quotations from Jesus.

The King's Feast

In today's story, the king has gone to great trouble preparing a wedding feast for his son, slaughtering enough oxen and fatted calves to feed several hundred people. It was not uncommon in Jesus' day that invitations would be sent out in two instalments: first, a general invitation to a future event; then, on the day itself or just before, a "reminder" to come since everything was prepared for the celebration. Not only do the guests refuse, but some of them seize the king's messengers and kill them. In response, the king sends his troops to burn their city. Then he sends out another invitation requesting that all persons – the "good" and the "bad" – be brought to the celebration.

The succession of invitations corresponds to God's declaration of truth concerning his Kingdom and his Son – first to Israel and then to the Gentile nations. Matthew presents the Kingdom in its double aspect: already present and something that can be entered here and now (22:1-10); and something that will be possessed only by those present members who can stand the scrutiny of the final judgment (22:11-14)

Proper attire for the feast

Matthew's addition of the guest without the wedding garment (22:11-14) can certainly leave the reader perplexed. I remember my first reaction to reading about this poor man without the proper vesture. Who is this king who dared to ask the poor man: "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?" Was it not the king who commanded his slaves to go out to the highways and byways and bring in anyone they could find? How then could the king be so cold and harsh to someone who has been "rounded up" for the royal feast, without even having the time to procure clean and proper clothing?

It is important to recall that this story is an allegory and doesn't necessarily follow normal ways of thinking and acting. Some scholars believe that the king provided the proper attire for his guests. It is not surprising then that the king becomes furious upon seeing a man improperly attired. This shows that this man deliberately refuses to receive the generous gesture of the king in providing proper attire.

The garment of righteousness and holiness

The parable of the wedding feast is not only a statement of God's judgment on Israel but a warning to Matthew's Church. As early as the second century, Irenaeus wrote that the wedding garment signified works of righteousness. The wedding garment signified repentance and a change of heart and mind. This is the condition for entrance into the Kingdom and must be continued in a life of good deeds.

The saying: "For many are called, but few are chosen" (22:14), should not be taken as a forecast of the proportion of the saved to the damned. Rather the saying is meant to encourage vigorous efforts to live the Christian life. The wedding feast is not the Church but the age to come. Matthew's parable confronts us with the paradox of God's free invitation to the banquet with no strings attached and God's requirement of "putting on" something appropriate to that calling. Who are the many and the few concerning the wedding garment? Are there some people God doesn't choose? How is being chosen different from being called?

The wedding garment of love

Let us consider the moving words of St. Augustine of Hippo in his sermon (#90) on today's Gospel passage:

What is the wedding garment that the Gospel talks about? Very certainly, that garment is something that only the good have, those who are to participate in the feast... Could it be the sacraments? Baptism? Without baptism, no one comes to God, but some people receive baptism and do not come to God... Perhaps it is the altar or what a person receives at the altar? But in receiving the Lord's body, some people eat and drink to their own condemnation (1 Corinthians 11:29). So what is it? Fasting? The wicked also fast. Going to church often? The wicked go to church just like others...

So what is this wedding garment? The apostle Paul tells us: “What we are aiming at... is the love that springs from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5). That is the wedding garment. Paul is not talking about just any kind of love, for one can often see dishonest people loving others... but one does not see among them this love “that springs from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith.” Now that is the love that is the wedding garment.

The apostle Paul said: “If I speak with human tongues and angelic as well, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal... If I have the gift of prophecy and, with full knowledge, comprehend all mysteries, if I have faith great enough to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:1-2). He said that even if he had all that, without Christ “I am nothing.” It would be useless, because I can act in that way for love of glory... “If I have not love, it is of no use.” That is the wedding garment. Examine yourselves: if you have it, then come to the Lord’s banquet with confidence.

Invite everyone to the banquet

Let us consider section #22, “Evangelizers and Educators as Witnesses,” of the Lineamenta for the 2012 Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization:

The formation and concern needed to sustain those already engaged in evangelization and recruiting new forces should not be limited simply to practical preparation, albeit necessary. Instead, formation and pastoral care is predominantly to be spiritual in nature, namely, a school of faith, enlightened by the Gospel of Jesus Christ and under the guidance of the Spirit, which teaches people the implications of experiencing the Fatherhood of God. People are able to evangelize only when they have been evangelized and allow themselves to be evangelized, that is, renewed spiritually through a personal encounter and lived communion with Jesus Christ. Such people have the power to transmit the faith, as St. Paul the Apostle testifies: “I believed, and so I spoke” (2 Cor 4:13).

The new evangelization, then, which is primarily a task-to-be-done and a spiritual challenge, is the responsibility of all Christians who are in serious pursuit of holiness. In this context and with this understanding of formation, it will be useful to dedicate space and time to considering the institutions and means available to local Churches to make baptized persons more conscious of their duty in missionary work and evangelization. For our witness to be credible, as we respond to each of these areas requiring the new evangelization, we must know how to speak in ways that are intelligible to our times and proclaim, inside these areas, the reasons for our hope which bolsters our witness (cf. 1 Pt 3:15). Such a task is not accomplished without effort, but requires attentiveness, education and concern.