

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A, Proper 23
October 9, 2011
Isaiah 25:1-9; Psalm 23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14
St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, High Point, NC
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Let us pray.

*Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.*¹

Preaching is all about finding the intersection of today with Scripture. Sometimes that is easy. This is not one of those days.

Finding a common theme in the Lectionary readings is simple enough. Isaiah speaks of a wonderful banquet that God will make for all people, "...a feast of rich food...of well-aged wines...strained clear."² The Psalmist sings poetically, "You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me...."³

Some time ago, I was talking with a very practical Jewish friend. I asked if she could tell me what is at the core of her faith. With a mischievous eye, she answered, "Good things happen. We eat. We celebrate. Bad things happen. We eat. We are comforted. Mostly, we eat."

We could answer my question the same way to describe Christian practice. No matter what happens, good or ill, we come together to eat, to make Eucharist. We eat the bread and drink the wine. And we follow that up with more wonderful food at coffee hour or a reception with *hors d'oeuvres* fit for a bishop.

Then we come to the Gospel. A king sends out invitations to a wedding banquet for his son. Have you ever been *in* a formal wedding? Then you know that the planning and execution of a wedding is an exercise in power dynamics: who pays for what, who is invited, who sits in what pew, who dances first and with whom.

In today's Gospel, the party thrower is the king. Kings and queens today do not exercise the same authority as in the time of Matthew's Gospel, especially after this year's "Arab Spring." I don't have a good comparison, especially when it comes to power, so I will offer you an alternative based on influence.

¹ Book of Common Prayer, 832.61.

² Isaiah 25:6

³ Psalm 23:5

Think back to the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton. Can you imagine anyone declining their invitation? Besides the things you would miss in person - the royal pomp and splendor, colorful costumes and indescribable hats – who would have the courage to insult Queen Elizabeth by saying no without a deathbed excuse?

But that is just what happens in this parable of Jesus. The king sends his servants out to tell the invited guests that the feast is ready. But everyone said no, "...made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them."⁴ Talk about killing the messenger – and they weren't even bearing *bad* news!

The king was unhappy – the Gospel says "enraged." He mustered his troops, and sent them out to burn the city and to kill the ingrates who disposed of his servants. (I know the text says "slaves," but all of the more recent translations say "servant" – and I'm already in deep enough without tackling another issue.)

Now, all in the same day, he sends his surviving servants out to gather anyone off the streets to his son's wedding banquet. I don't know how they kept the food hot through all the inviting, killing, maiming, and finding new guests. But the Gospel says "...the wedding hall was filled...."⁵

The king makes his grand entrance and begins a walk around, mingling with his new guests. He comes upon one man who is not wearing the proper attire, calls him "friend," and then asks how he managed to get into the hall without a tux. Okay, it wasn't really a tuxedo he should have been wearing, but the man was speechless.

I can only imagine what was going on in this soon to be former guest's mind. "Dude, I was hanging on the corner with my bros – and these other dudes came up and said we should come here for free grub. I thought it was Open Door Ministries, not the king's castle. And I don't even own a tux."

Some scholars suggest that if the guest had spoken, uttered a simple apology, all would have been forgiven. Nonetheless, the king directed "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."⁶ Doesn't this seem to be overkill?

Biblical scholars are in general agreement that today's reading from Matthew is the same story as appears in Luke 14:16-24. In Luke, the host is just a man and there is no wedding. The invited guests still make excuses, the host opens the

⁴ Matthew 22:5

⁵ Matthew 22:10

⁶ Matthew 22:13

meal to the "...poor, crippled, blind, and lame."⁷ There is no killing, no scorched earth, and no guest without proper attire. I can preach on that one.

Why the differences? Both Matthew and Luke are thought to be written roughly 40 to 60 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Mark was probably written a few years earlier, but there was only an oral tradition before that. How much detail can you remember for events that happened 40 years ago? 50? 60? How much accurate detail can you recall from last week?

Matthew and Luke were likely not eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus' life. Even if they were, their eyewitness accuracy would degrade over a passage of 40 to 60 years. Luke follows the chronology of Mark, but adds some stories from an unidentified source shared with Matthew. Each of the three was written for a specific audience. They all relay Truth, but sometimes the facts as presented may be slanted to a specific purpose.

In our Gospel for today, Matthew is writing for a 1st century Jewish audience that was sometimes scandalized by the number of gentiles in the early church. Matthew takes the core story shared with Luke and embellishes it with symbolism that would communicate with his readers. That doesn't make the story untrue, just a bit of a challenge to wrap our 21st century minds around.

Some scholars say that Matthew took a parable and made it into an allegory, rendering everything symbolic. Others tell us that it was Jewish tradition for the host to offer every guest a wedding gown made to go over whatever they were wearing to the banquet, a kind of equalizer to prevent class warfare. Maybe our wayward guest was actually wearing the finest equivalent of a tuxedo and didn't want to hide his finery around the dregs of humanity invited into this wedding hall.

On Wednesday this week, Ken suggested on Facebook that I would explain today why the wedding guest was thrown out of the party. Truth be told, I can't. I can give you theories, but the story is totally out of character for Jesus. Of course, I am now going to step over the line and give you one more theory.

I believe that the biggest hint to understanding the significance of today's Gospel comes in its sequence in Matthew's telling of the Jesus story. He places the story on Wednesday of Holy Week, when Jesus was struggling with the sea of treachery and intrigue all around him.

We are generally okay with saying that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, but the ramifications are generally not played out. We prefer for Jesus to be always divine, and not prone to human error. I suspect that Matthew understood the internal conflict within Jesus, and used this story to express what he saw as Jesus' frustration with his fellow Jews.

⁷ Luke 14:21

I can almost hear Jesus explaining the allegory. "I took on flesh for you, but you rejected me. So be gone to the netherworld where you will never know freedom again, only darkness and emptiness." That exasperation from the emotional underbelly is understood by anyone who is fully human. Most of us don't really mean the things uttered in anger, but they will likely not be preserved for 2,000+ years.

We understand Scripture in context, exploring it in light of tradition, as interpreted by experience. Today's Gospel reading stands in stark contrast with the whole of the Gospels. Jesus is not about the business of exclusion, as Bishop Curry reminded us last week. He is in the business of including, raising up, making whole.

Jesus is the good shepherd who goes after the one gone astray; he welcomes the squandering ingrate prodigal son home; he heals the sick; he crosses ethnic boundaries to praise the Samaritan for helping the downtrodden; he welcomes the penitent thief on the cross to go with him to Paradise. He is the son for whom the king has prepared the finest banquet. And he welcomes anyone who will come.

In the name of God: holy and undivided Trinity. Amen.