



Preach **Matthew** notes

(Year A Proper 23)

RELATED

Isa 25:1-9
Psalm 23
Phil 4:1-9

CONTINUOUS

Ex 32:1-14
Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23
Phil 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14 (NIV) The Wedding feast

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.

"Then he sent some more servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.'

"But they paid no attention and went off – one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find. So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. 'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless.

"Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

"For many are invited, but few are chosen."

In this parable, Matthew uses material common to both Matthew and Luke but not found in Mark – and uses it with considerable freedom. In Luke the parable concerns an evening meal thrown by a housemaster, here it is a wedding banquet for the son of a King. Matthew adapts his material to more closely correlate with the details of the preceding parables. So Luke's single servant becomes plural while the introduction of a second set of servants and mention of the murder of some servants corresponds to the parable of the Rented Vineyard. By contrast Matthew omits Luke's account of space being found and a second invitation to the marginalised being made.

Matthew clearly has his own emphases in the recasting of this parable. He alone adds a second parable which today reads as a slightly awkward extension referring to the casting out of a guest who did not have wedding clothes. As in preceding parables there is an emphasis on the end times of human history - when God's purposes for and his blessing of Israel will be revealed. A wedding banquet was one of the images associated with the coming of the Messiah in Jewish hope. Also present is a graphic emphasis on judgement in the destruction of the city.

Like the preceding parables this parable turns on the Sonship of Jesus. The cycle of disbelief cannot go on



for ever; the teaching and ministry of Jesus standing in the line of the prophets of old requires a decision, which in itself is judgement for good or ill upon those who hear.

This particular wedding invitation is not accompanied by a polite RSVP! Declining to attend is not an option. In both the Bible (2 Sam 10:4) and the writing of the Jewish

historian Josephus who was nearly contemporary with Jesus, the refusal of the king's invitation is the equivalent of tantamount to open

rebellion. The first invitation to celebrate turns upon the fact that those who receive the invitation owe their protection, their land and prosperity to the king. The second invitation carries a note of eschatological urgency "everything is ready". These two invitations include an element of obligation based on blessing and promise received.

The Gospel is gracious invitation but acceptance, which is itself an act of grace, implies recognition of sovereignty and with that appropriate obligation. Those invited reject the invitation to rejoice, to celebrate and to honour that sovereignty. Instead they focus on their business activities, rejecting the authority of the one whose patronage is the source of their wealth and power. Matthew cuts short the polite, almost defensible excuses offered in Luke's version of the story. The claim of lordship and the invitation to celebrate exceeds all other claims in the lives of the king's people. The danger in all discipleship is that while pursuing that which is in itself good and right and godly, our ordinary day to

▼

The Gospel is gracious invitation but acceptance implies recognition of sovereignty and with that obligation

day living, we can lose sight of that which has a higher claim upon our lives, namely the lordship of Christ. And so often it is the pursuit of business, of financial gain and accumulation of possessions that blinds us to that greater claim of lordship in our lives. In focusing upon the gift we lose sight of the Giver and the call to share in the joy of his life.

Interestingly the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas preserves a version of this parable in which a warning is given about trading and losing focus. Some think that the Thomas version reflects Jesus original parable more closely than Matthew does; more likely it is an editing of a Gospel account. However, the Thomas version is an indication of how the parable actually played out in the preaching and story telling of the early church. There would seem to be some anxiety around the tensions between the accumulation of possessions and faithful discipleship.

For Matthew once again the servants represent the OT prophets calling the people of Israel back to their status and calling as God's chosen people. The Greek phrase *tous keklamenous* translated as "those who had been invited" is a technical term for the people of God. The servants are then sent out again, this time to the outlets of the city, not to be understood as the crossroads but the points of exit in the city walls to seek new guests. Here too is the gracious invitation of the Gospel to the marginalised but acceptance once again carries with it appropriate obligation. Surely this is the meaning of the slightly awkward parable, which Matthew tags on in vv 11-14. Here a wedding guest does not have suitable clothes and is dismissed from the wedding feast into judgement. Matthew adds to Luke's version of the story that the invitation to the marginalised brought in both the good and the bad. His addition reflects the concern of the early church for





discipline. The kingdom of God is an untidy business.

Stewardship reflections

Stewardship is what we do after we say that we believe; mature stewardship acknowledges that God has a prior claim on our lives which supersedes all our priorities and preferences. This can sound harsh and can certainly be misinterpreted as a cruel form of self-denial. Jesus talks frequently about money, much more so in fact about than faith or prayer. This is not, as Carol Johnson notes, because he was obsessed by money. Rather Jesus was obsessed by the abundant life that he promises to us. Her knew that how we handle money either hinders or helps us enter the abundant life Jesus promised.

Core

Mature discipleship acknowledges God's prior claim on all areas of our lives, even those of work and family. This obligation is born of God's love for us in Jesus and the invitation is to enter into joy and to celebrate. It is perhaps all too easy for discipleship to focus on perceived obligation and lose its joy. All that we have is gift and grace; therefore cultivating a spirit of thankfulness is a key part of discovering and growing into joy. The discipline of planned giving is a key element in acknowledging God's lordship in a crucial area of our lives. It expresses thankfulness for all we have received. The key question is not "how much do I give" but whether my gift truly reflects who I am and what I have received from God.

Congregation

It is hard to acknowledge Jesus as Lord when our

own priorities are front and centre in our lives. In Luke's version of the parable those invited offer polite excuses almost defensible under the Law of Moses. In Matthew all that is abbreviated to the telling phrase, "They paid no attention". Their lives and livelihood was the first claim on their lives and it is this that prevents us from entering into the joy of our discipleship. More than that, our private choices have

consequences for church.



how we handle money either hinders or helps us enter the abundant life Jesus promised.

Matthews' account of soldiers sacking the city may reflect the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 or simply be literary convention but the point is that the citizens are dealt with as the leading men of a city in rebellion. Failure to provide

adequate financial resource means that parish and para church ministries are often cramped and ineffective. Money, which is a gift from God to be celebrated, becomes a burden and what should be a joyful sharing of resources between the parts of the body of Christ is transformed into a fearful, defensive and resentful calculation of how much we can afford.

Fringe

The heart of the parable is not the judgement of a city but the gracious and beautiful picture of an invitation to joy sent to those who never dreamed they might be invited. It is the joy of the surprise 40th birthday party, the reunion with old friends, the award for community service, recovery from serious illness, the rediscovery of life after bereavement or divorce, the job you never thought you would get, the reconciliation with a friend you thought lost for ever. The Gospel invitation is all this and much, much more. We are invited to joy; we





cannot settle for less by taking it for granted. Such gracious invitation requires the best that we have and the best that we are. ■

