

## 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 25:6-10A
<i>Response</i>	I shall live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 23:1-3A, 3B-4, 5, 6
<i>Second Reading</i>	Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	May the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ enlighten the eye of our hearts, so that we may know what is the hope that belongs to our call.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 22:1-4

On this Sunday we turn to another one of Jesus's parables in the Gospel of Matthew. It's the 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time, and the parable is that of, what I call, the royal wedding feast — it is sometimes called the parable of the wedding banquet. Those are all perfectly good names for the parable that we are looking at on the 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time in Year A. So we are moving right along in the Gospel of Matthew, and we can find the parable in Matthew 22:1-14. It is kind of a two-part parable, so stick with me as we read through it and I'll ask a few key questions about it and try to unpack its meaning.

And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the marriage feast; but they would not come. Again he sent other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, Behold, I have made ready my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves are killed, and everything is ready; come to the marriage feast.' But they made light of it and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the thoroughfares, and invite to the marriage feast as many as you find.' And those servants went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. "But when the king came in to look at

the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment; and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."<sup>1</sup>

Okay, I hope you can see here that as with Jesus's other parables, this is one of those stories that is rooted in common life, it is rooted in experiences that even today people will be familiar with; like being invited to a wedding banquet, being invited to a wedding and to the reception. That was a common part of Jewish life in the first century A.D. And yet at the same time, there are some aspects of the parable that are strange, that are weird, that are unexpected, twists. So, for example, in this case, number one, why don't the people accept the invitation to the wedding? I mean think about it, even today if we live in a republic or a democracy, if you received an invitation — like a wedding invitation — to the British royal families royal wedding, you would think twice about turning it down. This is a major event. The news media is going to cover it. This is a huge thing, it is something that would be a big deal. And yet, in this case, although these people are being invited to a royal wedding, where you know the food is going to be good and you know the drink is going to be good, and you know you are going to have a good time, they just turn it down to do things like go to your farm or your business. It doesn't make any sense.

Also too, another twist, notice that some of the reactions to the invitation is that they seize the servants, treat them shamefully, and kill them. Now that's an unexpected response to a wedding invitation. If somebody came to your house with a wedding invitation, you would not be inclined to take them aside and beat them, or much less to kill them. So already, you are only a few verses into the story and you are already realizing very clearly that this is no ordinary king, this is no ordinary wedding feast, and these are no ordinary invitations that are being sent out. Sure enough, the same thing happens with regard to the king's response. If

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

you sent a wedding invitation out to your relatives and your neighbors and a bunch of them didn't come, what would be your reaction? Would it be to go and find them and burn down their homes? Probably not, and yet that's how the king reacts here. So the king is angry, he sends an army in, and he burns down the city of those to whom he had sent the invitation but who rejected it and did not respond, who killed some of his servants.

And then finally, why does the king then turn around and say “go out to the streets and bring everyone in”? The good, the bad, the ugly, whoever. I want them all in my wedding feast. And then at the very final part of the parable, when this guy comes in and he is apparently not dressed adequately for the wedding, what is the king's response? Tie him up and throw him out of the wedding hall. And not just throw him out of the wedding hall, but throw him out into the “outer darkness; there people will weep and gnash their teeth.” Now if you're a Jew in the first century and you hear Jesus give this parable, you know what the outer darkness means. The outer darkness was a way of referring to Gehenna, of referring to the realm of the damned, of the place of darkness and distress, where those who were wicked and who had rejected God would weep and gnash their teeth in punishment and in eternal separation from God, in the torments of what today we would call hell.

So the beginning of the parable, the kingdom of heaven is like “X”, and the end of the parable, being outside the wedding is like hell; both make clear to the audience that this is no ordinary king, this is no ordinary wedding, and it's no ordinary wedding feast. So what's going on here? Well a couple points. Number one, obviously the king in the parable represents God, and he's giving a royal wedding feast for his son. So the son here is a symbol for Christ, for Jesus, the Messiah. In the Old Testament, 2 Samuel 2, Psalm 89, and in other places, the Messiah, the king of Israel, the Davidic king, would be referred to as the son of God. That was a standard title for the king in the Old Testament. So that is the background. However, there is even more going on here when you look at the imagery of the wedding feast, because here Jesus is alluding to a Jewish tradition that saw the coming of God's age of salvation in terms of a wedding banquet. This Jewish tradition is called the expectation of the messianic banquet — that is how scholars will refer to it — the messianic banquet, the banquet of the Messiah, the banquet of the kingdom of God. And this expectation of a future banquet of the Messiah was

actually rooted in the Old Testament itself, was rooted in the prophecies of the Jewish Scriptures, and in particular, in one prophecy from the book of Isaiah, which just so happens to be the first reading for today. So once again, although we are not done with the parable yet, let's go back to the Old Testament reading and see what that is. In Isaiah 25 we have a prophetic description of what would later be called the messianic banquet, and this is how Isaiah describes this great feast:

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined. And he will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth; for the LORD has spoken. It will be said on that day, "Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

So pause there. What is this banquet that Isaiah's describing? Well notice several characteristics of it. Number one, it's universal. Isaiah says it will be a feast "for all peoples." That is very important. That means that it's not just going to be a banquet for the Jewish people, for the Israelites, but for the Jews and the Gentiles, for Israel and the nations of the world, to the universal feast. Second, it's not just a universal feast, it's a sacrificial banquet. That is really important. You can see this when Isaiah says it will be a feast of "fat things." What is this reference to fat things? Well here Isaiah is alluding to the language of Temple sacrifice. If you go back to the Old Testament, in the book of Leviticus, one of my favorite verses is there. Everyone knows John 3:16 — I am sorry, I am laughing already, I can't help it — but this is Leviticus 3:16, which you will never see on a bumper sticker but which is a very important verse. Leviticus 3:16 says "the fat belongs to the Lord." You can put that on a bumper sticker someday if you would like to. What does it mean? Well basically, in context, Leviticus 3:16 means that when they would offer the sacrifices, they didn't keep the fat of the animal — which was very valuable — for themselves, but they would offer it to God. It would be burned up in the fire. So when Isaiah talks about a feast of fat things, it's just an allusion to the Temple, it is an allusion to Temple sacrifices.

So it is a universal banquet, it is a sacrificial feast, number three, it is a supernatural feast, because at this banquet, what will be swallowed up? Not just the sacrifices, but death itself. Death will be swallowed up forever, which means that the banquet is also salvific, it has saving power. As it says, “the Lord will come and will save us...take away our sins.” Well, I hope you can see now what the significance of that prophecy of the messianic banquet is for Jesus' parable in the Gospel of Matthew. If you go back to the parable in Matthew, you will understand that the feast that Jesus is speaking about in the parable is nothing less than the messianic banquet, the banquet of the kingdom of God, the banquet of salvation. The banquet where God will swallow up death for ever and ever in the resurrection of the dead. And that's why it's so shocking and so important that when God invites people to come to the messianic banquet, that when they refuse God, that when they reject the invitation, it is a matter, literally, of eternal life and death. This is no simple invitation to an ordinary wedding feast, it's an invitation to God's kingdom. It is an invitation to God's banquet. It's an invitation to the banquet of the Messiah.

So when they respond to it either by rejecting the invitation, or in this case by killing some of the servants who bring the invitations, you know now what's going on. Jesus is once again alluding to the rejection of him and his apostles by the leaders in Jerusalem. If you have any doubts about this, you might remember from last week, we saw the parable of the wicked tenants in Matthew 21 which Jesus delivered to the chief priests and the elders in Jerusalem's Temple. Well this parable of the royal wedding feast picks up immediately after that and says, again, “Jesus spoke to them in parables.” In other words, he is still addressing the same audience here. He is still addressing the crowd in Jerusalem, the leaders in Jerusalem, who have rejected him. So they represent, in that sense, those who had rejected the servants of the king, who had been invited to the banquet.

So in response to that, just as in the earlier parable of the wicked tenants, the vineyard was taken away from leaders and given to someone else, so too now, the invitation was sent to the leaders of the people, but since they've rejected it, the King says “well go out and invite everyone, the good and the bad. Go out into the streets and invite the people in for the royal wedding.” Now no king would ever do this. No king — well except maybe St. Louis, King of France, but that is a different issue, he was a saint — but no ordinary king is ever going to say “invite everybody, the poor in the streets, I want them to come into my wedding.” No,

there is going to be a short list. Even today for a royal wedding, if you are going to go to the British royal wedding, you have to be on the short list. You have to be among the elite of the world, or at least know the royal family in some way. But this king does something crazy, he says “go out in the street and invite everyone into my wedding feast so that the halls might be filled, good and bad, everyone can come.” So what that obviously represents, in a sense, is the message of the kingdom, beginning in the land of Israel, beginning in Jerusalem, but then once the Jerusalem leaders have rejected it, it's going to go out to the ends of the earth and it is going to include not just Israel, but also the Gentiles, not just the good, those who are members of the covenant, but the peoples of the world as well. Just like Isaiah's prophecy said, that there would be a universal banquet for all peoples.

Now, that's the basic imagery here of the first part of parable, but there is like an appendix to the parable where the king comes in to inspect the guests, and you have this bizarre image of one of the guests not having a “wedding garment.” What is that about? Well maybe you have had the experience of showing up at a wedding underdressed. Where everyone else was wearing tuxedos and you were just wearing some jeans and a t-shirt. If you have had the kind of experience of going to an occasion where you don't dress as well as everyone else, you know that you immediately feel singled out. You feel like you don't fit, like you don't belong, and apparently — we don't know a lot about this — but apparently in ancient Judaism, there was some kind of garment that could be worn at a wedding that would be an appropriate garment for a wedding feast. We don't know a lot about exactly what it looked like or how it was distinctive, but in this case this man has shown up to the wedding but he is not dressed appropriately, he is not wearing a wedding garment.

Obviously, since everything else in the parable has been symbolic, in other words it represents something else, what does the wedding garment represent in this case? What is the man lacking in the wedding feast? Well, the best clue that I can find for this is to go back to the Old Testament once again. It is not the reading this time, but in the book of Isaiah 61, Isaiah gives a prophecy. And he says in that prophecy, “the Lord has anointed me because he has commissioned me to proclaim good news to the poor, release to the captive...” so on and so forth. It's a description of the Messiah, the anointed one, *mashiach* is the Hebrew. If you read through all of Isaiah 61, all the way through, you will see that this figure of the

anointed Messiah, the anointed prophet, that later on in the chapter, in chapter 61 verse 10 and following, it says that God had clothed him with the “garments of salvation.” He had covered him with “the robe of righteousness” and dressed him “like a bridegroom.” So the only imagery we have from the Old Testament of a wedding garment that's explicit, is tied to the Messiah dressed in the wedding garment of righteousness, being clothed with salvation. So if we take that image from Isaiah and we kind of move it forward into the New Testament, what is being described here? Well the man without a wedding garment, in this sense, seems to be lacking righteousness. He's missing the righteousness that is fitting to the kingdom of God. Once again, it is almost like a parallel with the previous parable of the wicked tenants. They were lacking the fruit, which represented righteousness. Same thing here with the wedding feast, the man is lacking the wedding garment, which is the garment of righteousness.

So although he has been invited to the wedding feast, he is not living in accordance with the law of the king. So what happens to this man who's missing the wedding garment, who is not clothed in righteousness? He is cast out of the wedding feast, which represents the kingdom of heaven, and into the outer darkness, which represents *Gehenna*, it represents the realm of the damned. It represents hell, eternal separation from God. And you can see this elsewhere in the Gospel of Matthew, like in Matthew 8:11-12. One of Jesus' favorite images for being separated from God in Hell, in *Gehenna*, is to talk about, “there men will weep and gnash their teeth.” It's an expression of the distress and the anguish and the frustration of being separated from God, and being unable to enter into his presence. So then what does this mean? What's the impact of this? What is the righteousness that Christ is describing to us as needing to be clothed in?

Well it is real simple. If you look elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel, like in Matthew 7 or in the parable of the sheep and the goats, it's the righteousness of works of charity. Think about it. In Matthew 7, Jesus says “not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven.” The same thing in Matthew 25, the parable of the sheep and goats. Why are the goats lead off into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, why are they brought off to hell? Because they didn't engage in works of charity. They didn't clothe the naked. They didn't feed the hungry. They didn't care for the poor. They didn't visit the sick and imprisoned. So those works

of charity are like the fruits of the vineyard from the other parable. They are like the garment of the wedding feast. And if you're not living a life of righteousness, you are basically trying to attend the wedding banquet without being properly clothed, and the result will be — I was going to say you would be eternally bounced from the wedding, but that is probably not the best image. Well, I try. Anyway, you can see that this is Jesus' main image there, or should I say it is the main point of the parable. He sums it all up when he says "many are called, but few are chosen." What does that mean, "many are called, but few are chosen"? What he means is everybody's invited, but that doesn't necessarily mean that everyone is going to be chosen for the eternal kingdom. We have to be clothed with the garments of the Messiah. We have to be clothed with the garments of righteousness.

Alright, so that is the Old Testament and the Gospel. Before I conclude though, I want to make sure that I don't skip the Psalm — like I did last Sunday. Psalm 23 is the Responsorial Psalm for the 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time, and this is one that everyone knows. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures..." This is one of the famous Psalms in the Old Testament. It is the one that if you know a Psalm by heart, you know Psalm 23 by heart. So why is this Psalm chosen for the parable of the royal wedding feast? Well it's the end of the Psalm, because if we go down to the end of the Psalm, in verses 5-6, the Psalmist addresses God and says:

Thou preparest a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
thou anointest my head with oil,  
my cup overflows.

So notice it's the image of a banquet, a banquet hosted by God. You sit at God's table, he prepares it before you, and he fills up your cup — presumably with wine — and then the psalmist says:

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life;  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD  
for ever.



So where is the house of the Lord? Well that is the Temple. So what kind of banquet would you have in the Temple? You would have a sacrificial banquet. Usually, like for the priest, every week there would be a banquet of bread and wine. For the majority of people, they would go to the Temple once a year on Passover, and they would have a banquet of the flesh of the lamb and the wine in the Passover. So this is an appropriate bridge. In fact, some ancient Jews interpreted Psalm 23 as a kind of prefiguration of the messianic banquet, the banquet of the new David, the banquet of the Messiah; and that's why it's chosen today, to act as a bridge between Isaiah's prophecy of the messianic banquet in the first reading, the description of the banquet of the Lord, the Temple banquet in the Psalm, and then Jesus' parable of the messianic wedding banquet in the new covenant.

Okay, with that in mind then, what are the implications of this parable for us? Just like the parable of the wicked tenants, this parable has its primary meaning in the first century setting, it has a primary meaning in Jesus warning the leaders of Jerusalem that they need to accept the invitation to the kingdom of heaven, that they can't reject the messengers of the kingdom, which would be Jesus and his apostles. But for our purposes, and for us today, we can think of a couple of implications. First, the parable reflects the truth of the fact that Jesus Christ is not just the king, he is also a bridegroom, and the Church is his bride. So this isn't just any kind of feast, notice, it's a wedding feast. So the kingdom of God — think about this for a second — is like an eternal wedding reception. I don't know if you've ever been to a really beautiful, really holy, really joyful Catholic wedding; but there are a few things like the joy and the beauty of an amazing Catholic wedding reception. It's just a beautiful thing, and what Jesus is, in a sense, doing here is saying that heaven will be like being at that reception for all eternity. The joy, the happiness, the celebration, it is an eternal celebration; not of the love of a man for a woman, but of the love of God, in Christ, for his people, for his bride, the Church. That is the first thing.

The second insight from the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which is in paragraph 546, is this, the Catechism says “To gain the kingdom... Words are not enough. Deeds are required.” I will say that again, “To gain the kingdom... Words are not enough. Deeds are required.” In other words, the parable of the royal

wedding feast and the image of the garment shows us that the doctrine that many Christians today hold of *sola fide*, of salvation by faith alone, is not a biblical doctrine. It is not a teaching of Christ. Jesus' own teaching in the Gospel is very clear, that not only do we have to have faith, we also have to have works, especially works of charity, works of righteousness. And I can't illustrate this any better than Pope St. Gregory the Great did many, many centuries ago, over a thousand years ago. Pope Gregory the Great wrote on the parable of the wedding feast, and this is what he had to say:

What then must we understand by the wedding garment but love? That person enters the marriage feast, but without wearing a wedding garment, who is present in the holy church. He may have faith, but he does not have love. We are correct when we say that love is the wedding garment because that is what our Creator himself possessed when he came to the marriage feast to join the church to himself.<sup>2</sup>

That is an awesome image there from Gregory the Great. In other words, what did Jesus wear to his wedding feast when he came to join the Church to himself? He wore the garment of charity. So if we want to participate in the eternal wedding feast of the kingdom, then we need to dress just like he dressed. We need to dress ourselves in the garment of righteousness and in the works of charity. Which, by the way, makes me think of the beautiful tradition that we have in the Catholic Church. What happens after we are baptized, after we become members of the bride of Christ? We are clothed in our white baptismal garment, which represents the love of Christ, the charity of Christ, washing us of our sins. And what does the priest say to the baptized person, or the baptized child? Bring this garment unstained into the eternal kingdom, into the eternal wedding. And that's what we are called to on the day of our Baptism, and that is what we are called to every day of our lives as members of the kingdom of God.

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<sup>2</sup> Gregory the Great, Forty Gospel Homilies 38:9; trans. M. Simonetti, p. 146