

28th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME Year A

In today's Gospel we have two parables from Matthew: the parable of the wedding feast and the parable of the wedding garment. Both are such symbolic stories – allegories – that they only make sense when we see what they stand for. As straightforward stories they make little sense by themselves. A king invites guests to the wedding feast of his son. The king is the figure of God; the great feast was a popular Jewish image for the joy of the life to come – as we heard from today's first reading “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will prepare for all people a banquet of rich food, a banquet of fine wines”. The image of God in the tradition and in the parable speaks of a generous host who knows how to throw a good party.

When the wedding feast is prepared, the king sends his servants to inform those already invited that the feast is now ready. The servants stand for the prophets of Israel: the invited guests who refuse to come stand for the chosen people of Israel. The king sends out a second group of servants to plead with his guests to honour the invitation; these servants represent the first apostles and their mission to Israel. The original invitation speaks of God's gracious call to his chosen people; the second invitation underlines the patience of God – even when “everything is ready” he still hopes there will be a change of heart.

As Matthew saw it, the consequences of the refusal were terrible. The armies sent by the king are a figure of the Roman armies which besieged and captured Jerusalem in AD70, demolishing the Temple and burning the city. Finally the extension of the invitation to the highways and byways represents the carrying of the Gospel to the Gentiles, after Christ has been rejected by the Jewish people.

Matthew's story is so overlaid with symbols that it is easy to forget the central image of God as a gracious host who hopes that everyone will come to his banquet. That central image is at the heart of Matthew's story, but it could easily be lost amid the contrary symbols, where roast oxen get cold while a military expedition burns the city. And after that, when the king sees that among the bad and good picked up from the streets there is one without proper attire for the wedding, he has him bound hand and foot and thrown into outer darkness. All this makes it difficult to hold onto the original image of a generous host who knows how to throw a party !!

The conclusion to Matthew's parable of the wedding feast is another parable, the story of the wedding garment. It is similar to a parable of Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai, who was teaching about the same time as Matthew was writing. In this parable a king invited his servants to a feast, without saying what time it would take place. The wise prepared themselves at once and waited at the palace gates, for they believed a palace could prepare a feast very quickly. The foolish went off to their work, for they believed the preparations would leave them plenty of time. Suddenly the king announced that everything was ready. The wise ones came into the royal presence as they were, dressed in clean clothes – the acceptable wedding garment. The foolish ones arrived as they were, in their dirty work clothes. The king welcomed those who were properly dressed and commanded the others to stand and look on at the joy they had lost.

Matthew's version has been overlaid with symbol: the outside of the hall is described as outer darkness, where men will weep and gnash their teeth; that represents the hall of life in the age to come and outside it is hell. The wedding garment, the condition for entering the feast, is readiness, that is, conversion. At the final judgement, for the good and the bad, only those who are clothed in goodness will be invited to the banquet of life.

For ourselves, we hold precious the image of God who calls the good and the bad to the banquet of life. The expectation is that we will prepare ourselves now by being dressed appropriately for the occasion. Perhaps the best description of the proper wardrobe for a Christian is given to us by the apostle Paul. If we wear the clothes he describes we will never be thrown out of any banquet.

You are God's chosen race, his saints; he loves you and you should be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience.... Over all these clothes, to keep them together and complete them, put on love. And may the peace of Christ reign in your hearts. (Col.3: 12 – 15)