



Things to Ponder

Our Wedding Garment

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By Rev. Msgr. Kevin T. Hart

The events of the parable of the royal wedding feast in today's Gospel (Matthew 22:1-14) follow closely the cultural traditions of Jesus' time. When invitations to a great feast were sent out, the time was not stated. Only when everything was ready were the servants sent out with a final summons to tell the guests to come. So the king in this parable had long ago sent out his invitation; but it was not until everything was prepared that the final summons to attend was issued; and insultingly refused.

Jesus directs this first part of the parable to the Pharisees and elders of the people. Wedding banquets and feasts are often used in the Scriptures as images of the Kingdom of God. The Pharisees and elders represent the original invitees to this banquet, beginning centuries earlier when the Lord established His covenant with them. But now the banquet is ready, the Kingdom is at hand. Jesus is the Servant who announces to those invited that everything is ready. But like the guests in the parable, they refuse to attend.

The banquet described in our first reading from Isaiah (Isaiah 25:6-10a) and the royal wedding feast depicted in the Gospel both represent the Kingdom of God to which all peoples, with no exception, are invited to share and partake. They remind us that God's call to salvation and eternal life are universal invitations, because His love is universal. He excludes no one!

If we are honest with ourselves, God's universal love is sometimes hard to swallow. Yes, He loves you and loves me. But He also loves the people we don't: criminals, terrorists, child abusers, those whose greed has wrought economic hardships for our entire country, and those who, literally, have gotten away with murder. He even loves the members and leaders of the "other" political party. Yes, as hard as it may be for us to believe or understand, He loves them too. Jesus' allegory of the banquet in today's Gospel was directed at the scribes and Pharisees, who could not understand that God's love, and the Kingdom to which He invites us is, literally, a "free-for-all." They represent those guests originally invited to the Kingdom as the leaders of God's chosen people. But they turn their backs to that invitation by their repeated rejection of the prophets, and eventually even of Jesus Himself. They cannot understand why Jesus would welcome, mix with, forgive, and even eat with those considered irreformable sinners in their eyes.

This parable, like so many of the parables of Jesus, is an invitation to see whom we most resemble among the cast of characters. It is as if the story is a mirror which

Jesus holds up to our faces and invites us to see ourselves. We are certainly included among the second group of invitees: those from the highways and byways, the Gentiles who were not numbered among God's chosen people. But do we not also mirror the Pharisees and the elders, who are uncomfortable with a God who loves and forgives the very people we may even despise?

The second part of the parable with a reminder, directed to us, that the mere acceptance of the invitation does relieve us of the responsibilities that come with that acceptance. One poor chap shows up at the wedding without the proper attire, only to be kicked out forcefully. He accepts the invitation, but on his own terms, refusing to conform to the etiquette that was normal in ancient times when people entered the king's presence.

When we were baptized, the priest placed a white garment on us, saying to our parents, "See in this white garment the outward sign of your Christian dignity." That's our wedding garment. Maybe we should check out our wedding garment. Are we fully clothed with the presence of Christ? To what extent are our actions—our lack of forgiveness, our lack of openness, our lack of compassion, our inability to see the love of God in those whom we dislike or even despise—inappropriate dress for attending the great banquet of all in which Christ feeds us with His own real and true presence?

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St. Andrew Apostle Catholic Church, Silver Spring, MD