

Our wedding day is one of the most important days of our lives, isn't it? The day when you are joined before God to your fiancé(e) and you begin a new life with him or her. A day you look forward to for months, maybe **years**: and also a day you look **back** to maybe forever afterwards, for one reason or another.

But if you watch those telly programmes where people send in funny video clips, you'll know that there are so many things that can and **do** go wrong on the wedding day. And people always have stories to tell, don't they; perhaps they forgot to invite Auntie Mabel; perhaps the best man lost the rings; perhaps the wedding car broke down and the bride was late; perhaps the meal wasn't cooked properly; perhaps the two mothers wore the same hats; perhaps the hall for the reception was double-booked; perhaps the wrong suit's delivered to the groom and the jacket didn't fit. The day doesn't ever run smoothly, it seems to me.

On **our** wedding day, the timings went completely, and everything took longer than we planned. I didn't actually get to **eat** any of our wedding meal because we were so late. But the **disaster** of the day was when we went in the car up to the Devil's Dyke for some fresh air at the end of the day, and the exhaust fell off. So we were driving through Brighton making a real racket, 'Just married' plastered all over the car, taking it to Kwikfit to have a new exhaust fitted! A **real** laugh!

Jesus has a story to tell in the Bible about a wedding feast. The stories Jesus told - called 'parables' are stories which **connect** with people because they tell of things and situations from everyday life which the hearer can understand. But **behind** them there's always a **deeper** meaning relating to heavenly life, kingdom of **God** life. And **this** parable is no different, an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. This is a story with eternal significance, a matter of eternal life **with** God, or life for eternity **without** him.

Turn with me, if you would, to Matthew's gospel, chapter 22, where we find Jesus speaking to a crowd and a group of Jewish elders, leaders of the Jewish community. [Read Matthew 22:1-14]

Before we start looking at this parable, I should just say that the feast that's being talked about here isn't referring to the meal we'll be remembering **later** as we take the bread and the wine. But everything in God's word **does** centre on the saving work of Jesus on the cross, so of course this parable **is** linked to God's plan of salvation, as we'll see shortly.

Quick overview: whenever we come to the Bible, the first thing we should ask ourselves is ‘what do we learn about God? Not ‘what does this have to do with me?’ As we learn about **God** first, then the application to our **own** lives will follow. Because that’s what God wants. The Bible says getting to know God and his **truth** will set us free, free to be in relationship with **him**.

So we’re aiming to get to know God more by looking at the feast mentioned here, by the invitations given, and by the clothes worn.

We can’t just pick this story out without remembering where it fits into the Bible story, so you’ll remember that we’re in the final week of Jesus’ earthly ministry before his death on the cross. A couple of days ago – chapter 21 - he’d ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey, and the crowds welcomed him as a **king** with loud shouts of ‘Hosanna to the Son of David.’ Since **then** he’s been talking about the kingdom of God, but he’s been highlighting the things that the Jews had got **wrong**. And that’s where **this** parable comes in.

This generation needs to hear that they’re going **wrong**. And the church **fails** when we don’t include this in our message. How can the world know how to go the right **way**, if they don’t even know they’ve got it **wrong**? Jesus told the Jews how they were going wrong. Verse 1: ‘*Jesus spoke to them ...*’; the people he’s speaking to are mentioned in chapter 21 verses 23 and 45 – they’re the chief priests, the elders of the people and the Pharisees. And they **knew** he was speaking about **them**. Jesus was speaking **to** them and **about** them, as he condemns the **wrong**-doers in his parables. That’s why they wanted to get **rid** of him.

Jesus tells the story of the kingdom of heaven being like the banquet arranged by the king for the wedding of his son. The **king**, of course, represents God himself. This is a **banquet organised and provided by God** himself. But Jesus is talking about the kingdom of **heaven** here, so we’re meant to be thinking about coming into the King’s presence. We’re thinking about coming into **God’s** presence. We’re thinking about coming into **relationship** with the **King**, with God. The banquet that has been organised is a relationship with **God**, the King. Coming into the kingdom of heaven.

And it’s described as a **banquet**. A **feast**. The king has provided a sumptuous feast. And this would be a **countrywide** feast. The most lavish feast the king could afford because it’s for the wedding of his **son**. Nothing held back. The cost is of **no** consideration. This is to be the banquet to end all banquets. A veritable feast.

I don't know about **you**, but **I** get very disappointed and even **annoyed** when the staff at my school decide to go out for a meal and they choose to go to a posh restaurant, pay a lot of money, and when your meal comes it's about as big as a two-pence piece in the middle of your plate, and you have to stop off at the chippy on the way home for a real meal!

The event talked about in Jesus' story isn't a snack, it isn't just a meal, it's a **banquet**, a **feast**, a **once in a life-time** event, no expense spared because it's all paid for by the king. All the **richest** of fayre. Food you've never tasted before, perhaps never even **heard** of. A banquet!

Jesus is saying here that coming into the kingdom of **heaven**, coming into a relationship with God the king through Jesus the son, is like coming to a **banquet**. Becoming a child of God is like tasting the richest of foods; like tasting delicious food that you've never tasted **before** – 'Taste and see that the Lord is good'. You've never experienced **anything** like this until you come into the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God.

Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians, '*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.*' **This** is the banquet of the kingdom of heaven, to know **God** through Jesus. To know every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms. How do we know **this**? Paul goes on to write, '*In him [Jesus] we have **redemption** through his blood, the **forgiveness** of sins, in accordance with the **riches** of God's grace that he **lavished** on us with all wisdom and understanding.*' **This** is the real banquet. Coming into God's kingdom through the forgiveness of our sins through Jesus' death on the cross.

God has provided this banquet, this opportunity, this meeting with him, almighty God, the king – he's prepared it **all**. We read in verse 4, the king says '*I have prepared my dinner.*' This is something the **king** has prepared. Later in verse 4 we read, '*and **everything** is ready.*' The banquet's prepared. **Everything** is ready. **Now** is the time to come, because the king has made sure that **everything** is **ready**. **Everything**. He has **seen** to it. There will be nothing **missing**, the experience will be **complete**. The king makes this certain, because that's what the king **does** – that's his job

God – represented here by the king – has done it **all**. He's prepared **everything**. When **God** says he's done something, he's **done** it. And he's done it **fully**. And he's done it **perfectly**. '*Everything is ready.*'

God has prepared this banquet, God has provided the feast. God has made sure that everything we need to meet with **him**, to come into a **relationship** with him, to become people of the kingdom of heaven, **everything** is ready. God has provided the way for us to come and to enjoy a banquet, a life full of the **richest** of experiences, of all he wants to give.

The banquet's ready. There's no time to **lose**. The Bible says, *'I tell you, **now** is the time of God's favour, **now** is the day of salvation.'* Now is the day of salvation. Everything's **prepared**. There are no **excuses**, no reasons for **missing** it. The banquet is ready, the kingdom of heaven is ready for you to enter. Have **you** entered? Are you still working your way in that **direction**? It's ready.

What do we learn about **God** through the banquet? That he is sovereign – he's provided it. He's in control – he's prepared it. He's lavish in his provision – riches that money can't buy. He's generous in what he offers – it's open and free to all. He was willing to pay whatever it cost for you to come to the banquet, for **you** to come into his kingdom, to get to know him through **Jesus**, Lord and Saviour. Who can **refuse** such an offer?

Well of course we read in this story that there were **then**, and there still are **now**, **many** who refuse to come. How could they turn down the **invitations the king sent**?

The king sends out his invitations. He sends his servants with the invitations. He's prepared the banquet, everything's ready and he invites people to **come**, in verse 4. But **surprisingly**, those invited refuse to **come**. Of course this would have been a great insult to the king, that his subjects refused to come to the event of the year, the banquet for his son's wedding. That the king had gone to **all** the expense and trouble of organising this feast and then sending messengers with invitations, only to have the invitations turned **down**. What an **insult** to the king!

Nevertheless, he sends his servants a **second** time in verse 4 – *'Come to the banquet.'* He invites the people **again**, because everything's prepared and he really wants them **there** to enjoy the banquet. But we read in verse 5, *'they paid no attention and went **off** – one to his field, another to his business. ... The king was **enraged**.'* They didn't just ignore the invitations, they went **off**, they **acted**, and did other things **instead**. How **could** they?

The Queen's celebrating her diamond jubilee this week, isn't she? What if she held a banquet at Buckingham Palace, and decided that she wanted **you** there to celebrate with her, this once-in-a-lifetime event.

What if she sent you one of her servants, you hear a knock at the door and there's the invitation on a red-padded cushion, carried by a messenger from the Queen herself. Why **would** you turn it down? There are probably **lots** of possible reasons.

Perhaps you don't **believe** that you could possibly be invited. Who are **you**, who am **I** to receive an invitation to the Palace? We've been so programmed now in this country to think that if it's too good to be **true**, it probably **isn't** true. We've said 'no thank you' to so many phone calls, so many emails, so many letters, we probably wouldn't notice the one **genuine** offer. **Nothing** comes free. What demands will it have on my time, my money, my life?

We're too **B** nowadays, aren't we. So many are putting their **career** before any other consideration. Can't possibly go, I've got so much **work** on. Or is that just an **excuse**? Just an escape?

Perhaps the Olympics torch was running through Brighton that day. The Olympics only happens once every 4 years. Can't miss **that**.

Perhaps you've booked a **holiday**, and don't want to delay it or postpone it – too much hassle. Perhaps you've just got **married** (like it says in the parallel passage in Luke 14) and you're too happy with wedded bliss to want to think about **anything** else at the moment. And you'd probably feel out of **place** anyway.

One man in our passage went to his field, another to his business. They paid no attention to the invitation – they went off to where they were **safe**, where they knew what they were doing, where **they** were in control.

Are all these just excuses? Are these valid reasons for refusing the Queen's invitation?

The reasons given in our passage, any reasons given at all, are seen as mere excuses, invalid, unacceptable, an insult to the king. But **we** aren't so different now. It's easier to stick with what we **know**, where we're **safe**, where **we're** in control.

The king invites to the banquet; God invites to his **kingdom**. **Any** reasons given to refuse his gracious invitation are seen as mere excuses, invalid, unacceptable, they enrage God.

But notice that the king **keeps** inviting. He doesn't send out invitations **once**, but he sends them out **again**, and he sends them out a **third** time. God keeps inviting into his kingdom, again, and again. He is so gracious, so loving. He invites **all** to come, but not everybody **will**.

People don't fail to come into God's kingdom because they're not **invited**, it's because of what they **do** with the invitation. They **refuse** the invitation, they turn **away** from God's offer, again and again.

The king sends his servants in verse 8, and says, '*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.*' The people Jesus was speaking to here, the elders of the Jewish people, the chief priests, the Pharisees had **refused** God's invitations. So the offer is now extended to people **further** afield. The invitation is for anyone they could **find**. The invitation is for **all**, but not all will accept.

Have you received your invitation to the banquet? Have you received the invitation to come into God's kingdom? God is gracious, he's loving – he doesn't want **any** to perish, he's persistent, he'll keep inviting until the day he decides to wind up history. Have **you** responded to his call? It may seem too good to be true, but it **is** true. You may think you have other more **pressing** matters to attend to. You may want to stay **safe** in what you know. But **now** is the day of salvation. The invitation is **now**. The banquet is **ready**. The **kingdom** is ready. **Accept** the invitation. Don't delay.

Many **do** come, but what about the one we read about in verses 11–13? This man **did** respond to the invitation; he **did** come to the banquet. [Read 11-13.] The guests have to come **wearing the clothes the king has provided**.

Here's a man who's come to the banquet, but he gets **rejected**, he gets thrown **out**. I thought the king had told his servants to invite anyone they could **find**. Why then does he throw this man **out**? Why can't **he** enjoy the banquet?

The king says, '*Friend, how did you get in here without wedding clothes?*' We **know** it's not good news straight **away**, because Matthew only uses this word 'friend' three times, and each time the person **referred** to is in the **wrong**; once in a parable in chapter 20, when the man thought he was being paid an unfair wage; and the other time of **Judas** in chapter 26 when he came to the Garden of Gethsemane with soldiers to arrest Jesus.

This '**friend**' thought he could get into the banquet without wearing the right **clothes**. Apparently the king paid for the banquet, sent out invitations to all and sundry, and he even provided **clothes** for all his guests to **wear**. How **generous**!

This man thought he could wear whatever he **wanted** to wear. He didn't want to wear the **king's** clothes, his normal working in the garden on a **Saturday** clothes seemed good enough to **him**. When asked how he got in without wearing the proper clothes that the king had provided, he had no **answer**, and he was bound hand and foot and thrown *'outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'*

You may think, 'Well, that's a bit **harsh**, isn't it? Being thrown out of the banquet just because he was wearing his everyday clothes rather than what the **king** had supplied. A bit of a severe punishment for such a **trivial** thing, wasn't it?

We used to take German exchange students to London for a day. What they always wanted to do was go to Harrod's. This **particular** year we got to the door and we were refused **entry** because some of the students were wearing **shorts** and carrying rucksacks. We couldn't go in because we were wearing the wrong clothes.

This man thought **his** clothes were **good** enough, and the application of **this** is why Jesus says there is severe punishment for this man and any **like** him.

Remember, the banquet represents coming into the kingdom of heaven, coming into a relationship with **God**. Any who **accept** his invitation must come in **God's way**, wearing the right clothes. God has paid for the banquet, God has provided the means, God has given us the way of coming to him. **Isaiah** caught this vision when he said, *'he [God] has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness.'* We can't come in our **own** clothes, we can't come to God in our **own** strength, we can't come into the kingdom of heaven in our own **goodness**, we have to wear the clothes God has provided, we have to come to him through **his** way of salvation. This is what this is **getting** at here.

The clothes that God has provided for those who will be acceptable to him are available because **Jesus** has made it possible. We're **all** unworthy to come to the banquet – who am **I** to be invited by **God** into his **kingdom**? There's nothing about **me** that makes me worthy of his call. I'm not fit to be **seen** before God, never **mind** to enjoy the banquet of a **relationship** with him. **Jesus** provides the way.

What's the difference between those who're welcomed into his kingdom and those that are thrown out? **Jesus**. Coming to Jesus and asking forgiveness for your treatment of God, trusting in what Jesus did in **dying** for you on that cross, knowing that salvation can **only** come through believing that Jesus died for you, paying the price **you** deserved to pay for your sins, relying on **him** as Lord and Saviour of your life; only **then** are you wearing the right clothes to be acceptable to God; only **then**

are you wearing the clothes that God has provided; only **then** can you enjoy the feast that is eternal life with God. Many are invited, but only those who come in **God's** way – through **Jesus** – will show that they have been chosen.

But we have to be aware of the **alternative** to being in God's kingdom. We must know the **consequences** of refusing to accept God's invitation. In the parable the man was thrown '*outside into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*' For those who **reject** the offer, there will be darkness, no light, no God, no goodness, no love, no joy, no hope. There will be eternal **darkness** and regret. There will be no God of mercy **there**. **This** will be the eternity that awaits all who reject the salvation that is held out by Jesus alone. Then it'll be too late. This is the certain consequence of refusing the king's invitation. Why **go** there?

Let's summarise: God's provided the feast of the kingdom, eternal life with **him**; he's paid the great cost of **entry** to the kingdom in the death of his Son, Jesus; he's sent out the invitations far and wide – many are invited but not all will accept and be accepted; he's supplied the clothes of salvation, the way and means of us coming into the kingdom, and that's what we're going to celebrate in a few moments, because without the **Son**, without **Jesus**, there would **be** no banquet; **none** would be able to enter in.

Can I finish with a quote from J.C. Ryle, Bishop of Liverpool in the 19th century: (Expository Thoughts on Matthew, Page 280 last line – willing himself.)

We're all invited, but we have to come through Jesus, accept the salvation that he has provided. The banquet is ready, all is prepared. The invitation demands a response. What's your response?