

**What are you wearing?
15 October 2017
Revd Jenny Wilkens**

Exodus 32:1-14
Philippians 4:1-9
Matthew 22:1-14

http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html



The nearest I've ever come to attending an event like a royal wedding, was probably when I attended the enthronement of the Archbishop of Canterbury back in 1991. I can recall going to Marks & Spencer's to buy a new jacket and skirt to go with my clerical shirt, as it was important in those days prior to the ordination of women as priests in the Church of England to be waving the flag! I recall being filmed by TV cameras while queuing to go in at Canterbury Cathedral. I dithered over whether I should wear a hat, but in the end didn't, I decided it was a church service, not a wedding or garden party!

But in today's Gospel and Jesus' parable, what guests are wearing at a royal wedding comes right to the fore. This parable follows hard on the heels of the parable of the tenants of the vineyard we heard last week. And if this parable of the wedding banquet sounds vaguely familiar to you, that is because we are far more familiar with Luke's version of it, listing all the excuses why those first invited to the banquet could not attend. This has been immortalised in the Medical Mission Sisters' song whose chorus enjoined "I cannot come to the banquet, don't trouble me now, I have married a wife, I have bought me a cow" which I recall youth groups delighted in rephrasing as "I have bought me a wife, I have married...", well, enough said!

But it is the differences between Matthew's and Luke's versions of this parable that cause us problems, Matthew's additions that reflect his determined allegorising of the parable to suit his particular emphases for his community.

For one thing, Matthew's telling is full of hyperbole, of extreme responses and violence. It's been said if this was made into a film, it would be a horror movie¹, with people being murdered and a city burnt just for refusing an invitation, for heaven's sake! It seems likely that Matthew is tailoring Jesus' parable to interpret the destruction of Jerusalem in 70CE, reflecting early Christian views that this was because of the rejection of Jesus as Messiah.

¹ Debie Thomas in 'Living by the Word', *Christian Century*, Sept 14, 2017

But perhaps the part we struggle with the most is at the end of the parable where the hapless wedding guest, who was perhaps surprised to be ushered in to the wedding at all, was then equally surprised to be accosted by the host for not wearing the correct wedding attire and unceremoniously dumped out into outer darkness! We may well want to say, God, that's not fair! And reflect that this depiction of God seems strangely capricious and makes us feel distinctly uneasy.

Well, right from the early Christian centuries, interpreters and scholars have tied themselves up in knots trying to interpret just what this wedding garment could be that the poor guest is mysteriously lacking. Some continue the allegory: Augustine said the wedding garment was love, Luther said that of course it was faith, Calvin tweaked that slightly to say the wedding garment was faith and good works together. Others² comment in terms of social history – that in Jesus' time, a wealthy wedding host would provide special celebratory garments for the guests to wear, so it looked like this guest was gate-crashing, slipping in the back door, trying to enter the kingdom on their own terms.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests³ that Matthew takes the imagery of this parable from Isaiah 25 where Isaiah envisages a future where 'the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a banquet of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear' (Isaiah 25:6). That passage of Isaiah pulls together 5 colourful images of God: 'God as the giver of the biggest dinner party you ever heard of', but also God as destroyer of the ruthless, refuge to the poor, the one who swallows up death, and the gentle nursemaid who wipes away the tears from all faces.

Brueggemann feels that Matthew calls on all these images of God in his parable – even if our credulity is somewhat strained by all those clashing symbols and metaphors! How does Brueggemann cope with the guest with no 'wedding garment'? He says this: "This is a very odd turn to a lovely metaphor. I did not expect the host to act this way after his wonderful gesture of inclusiveness. I take it to mean, when you get invited to a new metaphor, you have to respond and define your life in terms of it. If you take God as a feast-giver, then you must conduct yourself as a guest at a feast...you must give signs that you are prepared for newness and joy, ready to begin again...you are invited to live in the world of God's newness".

² Rosalind Brown, *Church Times*, 10 October 2014.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Collected Sermons*, Westminster John Knox Press, Kentucky, 2011, p.37ff

Sam Wells⁴, Vicar of St Martin in the Fields, London reminds us that for the earliest Christians, mention of a wedding robe would have called to mind for them the white robe of baptism, the robe which wedded them, covenanted them to Christ. And that for the Christians of the early centuries, this was a risky commitment, to follow Christ when Christianity was a persecuted sect, not yet a legal religion, when following Christ as disciple might mean consequences for one's family life and employment, just as it is for many Christians in our world today. He puts it this way: 'Baptism is the definitive moment when Christians say, "I am allowing myself to be made different, by the difference made by Christ"...The banquet is for people who know that the question that really matters is, "Have you been made different? Have you allowed Jesus to make a difference in you?"

How does that happen? Perhaps for that we need to turn to St Paul: As many of you as were baptised into Christ, have clothed yourselves with Christ. (Galatians 3:27).

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. (Colossians 3:12)

May we come to Christ afresh today and ask him to clothe us anew with our baptismal robe with our wedding dress, as we come to join him at the eucharistic feast, the banquet of our salvation. Amen.

⁴ Samuel Wells, Living by the Word, *Christian Century*, 7 October 2008.