

Today we come to the third of a series of three parables that Jesus told to do with the Kingdom of God. First, we had the story of two sons – one who said he would do what was his father asked but didn't, and the second who said he wouldn't do what his Father asked, but then did. Angela spoke to us about this being about true obedience to God. Last week we had the story of the absentee landlord of the vineyard, and his slaves being killed as they tried to collect his rent, and we looked at how this story can be linked to people joining the family of God.

And today we have the parable of the wedding banquet. As we have gone through these three parables they have become increasingly difficult to understand, with this week's having two particular apparently strange sections which we will need to look at. But first let's see what is actually going on in this parable – and to do that we need to understand how this sort of wedding would have actually worked in those days – after all we are told that, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son."

The key to what is going on is in the next sentence, "He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet." The invitations for this wedding banquet would have been sent out possibly months ahead – not dissimilar to how we do things today – and these people who the slaves are now calling would have already accepted their invitations. So when they decided not to come, they are not simply turning down an invitation, they are not bothering to come to a wedding banquet they had already committed to come to. The preparations for this event would have been months in the planning, and the actual amount of time the final preparations would take would not have been known – but now everything is ready and so the guests are told, "Now is the time to come – so come now." And they didn't. They had been invited. They accepted the invitation. But now other things seemed to be more important than acting on the King's invitation and their acceptance – and worse still, some of those "guests" mistreated or even killed the messengers.

But the King was not going to let the actions of these people spoil his Son's wedding. He sent his slaves out into the streets to gather anyone who they could find, bad or good, to come and celebrate the wedding – and so the wedding hall was full of guests.

So, is this parable simply a repeat of the previous one – in the vineyard. There the landowner was God – here the King represents God. There the vineyard represented the country of Israel – the promised country for the people of God, Here the wedding banquet represents the people of God. There the farmers who rented the vineyard and mistreated those slaves represented the Jewish Authorities, here it is those invited guests who refuse to come to the party who represent the Jewish Authorities.

The difference, though, between the two stories is that the vineyard story was talking about the building up of the Kingdom of God – Jesus explained this when he talked about the coming Messiah prophesied in Psalm 118 being the cornerstone – whereas this story is more about how people who have accepted God should then act.

These wedding guests have accepted their invitations. They know full well what is then expected of them – they are expected to come and join the party, to welcome the Son and his bride, and they have chosen not to do what is expected, what is required. So what this parable is talking about is how, once you have accepted Jesus as your Saviour – what is expected next?

But before we look at that, what about those two apparently strange sections? The first one was that, in the middle of what was supposed to be the gathering of people for his Son's wedding banquet, the King decides to, "send his troops, destroy those murderers, and burn their city." This seems like it would rather delay the wedding and seems to be totally inappropriate at that time. What we need to know, though, is that Matthew's gospel was written probably somewhere between 80 and 90 AD – and this was

after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman Authorities in AD 70. So it appears that when Matthew wrote his gospel he interjected a comment into Jesus' story which linked this story into the destruction of Jerusalem. What Matthew is saying is that if the Jewish Authorities had accepted the way of Christ, and had walked in love, in humility, and in sacrifice they would never have been the rebellious, warring people who finally provoked the avenging wrath of Rome, when Rome could stand their political machinations no longer. I should point out that is a generally held view of why that verse exists in this story and talks about what happened nearly 2000 years ago. It is in no way a comment at all about what is happening in the Middle East today.

The second apparently strange section is the last part of the reading – verses 11-14 – about the man inappropriately dressed – and I will come back to that in a moment, but first, what is this parable saying to us today?

There is an element of bad news and good news going on here. The bad news is that in the parable there were people who had followed God, who were part of God's chosen people in God's chosen country, but when God threw a party for his Son they had refused to come. Galilee had refused for the most part and now Jerusalem was refusing the invitation as well. God was planning the great party for which they had been waiting for so long – for the coming of the Messiah, and they didn't want to know. How terribly sad. But has that bad news changed much? There are many people in the world today who accept that God exists, believe that Jesus came to this earth, but then won't do anything about it. Is that not equally sad?

But then there is the good news. Because God's chosen people wouldn't come to the party, God opened up the invitation to anyone and everyone. God's new messengers were going out to the unfashionable places, the rough places, the places where the Jewish Authorities were simply not there, and people came in their droves. It was that list of people that we hear about in the bible so often – the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the money lenders, the blind, the lame, the poor who all thought they had been forgotten, and they all came.

And that is what we must always ensure that we do – we must always be open to everyone. We must be truly welcoming to everyone, and we must ensure that the party we are inviting them to is one that they will want to come to.

What do I mean by that? Those people who in the parable were invited to the party when the original attenders wouldn't come were thrilled that God's message was for them after all – they had previously been ostracised by society because of what they do now, or in their past, but now they were welcomed and they were thrilled to come. But is the same true today? The difficulty is that what people want to hear today is that everyone is alright exactly as they are; that God loves us as we are and doesn't want us to change. But that is not how it works. When the blind and the lame came to Jesus, he didn't say, "You're alright as you are" – he healed them. They wouldn't have been satisfied with anything less. To the tax collector Jesus didn't just leave him as he was, but by his teaching the tax-collector realised he had to correct his ways and give back ill-gotten gains.

Actually, nobody really believes that God wants everyone to stay exactly as they are. God might love serial killers and sex molesters; the ruthless and arrogant businessman, the manipulative mother who damages her children's emotions for life – he loves all these people but he doesn't want those people to stay as they are. It is by accepting God's love that people realise they have to change. The very idea that someone can accept God through grace, and then do nothing towards becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ is frankly just unbelievable.

And that is what the second apparently strange section is all about. In the parable one of the guests, despite getting this late unexpected invitation to the party, was not prepared to do the little that was expected of him to attend the party, and that was to put on his best clothes. That is what was expected in those times – for a wedding you didn't go out and buy a new outfit – it was not until Victorian times that that started to happen – you simply changed into your best outfit.

And this is also not saying anything about what we should wear when we come to church, but what it is saying is that the point of God's love is that he wants people to come to him to be prepared to change. A good God cannot allow people to carry on doing things that are wrong. By the guest not being prepared to put on the right clothes to attend a wedding, that person is saying they don't want to stay at the party.

So in our churches we need to establish a place where everyone is welcome, we need to do things in our churches that people will understand and that will help them get closer to God, but at the same time we also need to ensure that people realise there is no free entry into the Kingdom of God. To join the family of God might mean that somethings in your life has to change, and yes, of course we will help people to do that over time, but if they aren't prepared to accept that then they might just end up like that wedding guest – and be placed outside.

But finally let me also say this. When looking at a passage like this it is very easy to talk about them, or those people, and actually forget that there is much in a passage like this that applies to each and every one of us. Earlier I said this, "So what this parable is talking about is how, once you have accepted Jesus as your Saviour – what is expected next? ". These three parables have been speaking to each and every one of us. Our faith, as the apostle Paul tells us, comes to us by the grace of God, not by our actions – but when we studied the book of James earlier this year he made it clear that once we have faith, faith without actions is worthless. What these parables have shown us is the difference between simply having faith in Jesus Christ, and becoming a disciple of his. Let us not be like those people who were invited to the wedding but then couldn't be bothered to use our invitation – let us all be willing attenders at the party. Yes, let us accept the gift of faith that God has given us, but then let us grow as his disciples.

Amen.