

Could Jesus tell the Parable of the Wedding Banquet outside Jerusalem? Could he not have told the Parable at the beginning of His ministry in Galilee? Some scholars, under the influence of Albert Schweitzer, believe Jesus went to Jerusalem, as it were, to cast His last dice. That is to say, to make a final appeal to the nation, to listen and accept His message: 'The Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the Good news.'

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet had to be told in Jerusalem because it tell us what would have happen if the nation did not take heed of what Jesus offered them.

This Matthean version of the Parable has many interesting points. 1. It is different from Luke 14.15-24 where it mentions a landowner throwing a banquet; whereas Matthew's is a King who made a wedding feast for his son. 2. V.7 is bracketed, that is to say, was added later, perhaps by Matthew himself, so that his readers would make the connection between what Jesus was saying and the terrible events of AD 70. 3. Why is the one without wedding suit singled out? Would the rest really have the appropriate apparel? Aren't they mostly poor?

In one sense we can understand the meaning of the Parable as follows: Jesus has been going around Galilee summoning people to God's great supper. This is the moment Israel has been waiting for! At last the time has arrived; those who were invited long ago must hurry up now and come! But most of them have refused, giving all kinds reasons; we are reminded of the parable of the seeds and soils, in which various things caused most of the seeds to remain unfruitful. But some people have been delighted to be included: the poor, the disadvantaged, the disabled. They have come in and celebrated with Jesus.

From the text itself, it follows straight on from the devastating story of the Wicked Tenant Farmers in chapter 21. Everyone would know what a story about a landowner with a vineyard was referring to; equally everyone in Jesus' time would know the point of a story about a king throwing a wedding party for his son. Jesus may well have told this kind of story several times; hence we have a slightly different story in Luke. This story is about the coming of God's Kingdom, and in particular the arrival of the Messiah.

Israel's leaders in Jesus' day, and the many people who followed them, were like guests invited to a wedding – God's wedding party, the party He was throwing for His son. But they have refused; Galilee has refused, for the most part (11.20-24). Now Jerusalem was refusing the invitation as well. God was planning the great party for which they had waited so long. The Messiah was here, and they didn't want to know. They abused and killed the prophets who had tried to tell them about it, and the result was their city would be destroyed.

But now for the good news – though it wasn't good news for the people who were originally invited. God was sending out new messengers, to the wrong parts of town, to tell everyone and anyone to come to the party. And they came in droves. We don't have to look far in Matthew's Gospel to see who they were. The tax-collectors, the prostitutes, the riff-raff, the nobodies, the blind and lame, the people who thought they had been forgotten. They were thrilled that God's message was for them all.

But there was a difference between the wide-open invitation and the message so many want to hear today. We want to hear that everyone is all right exactly as they are; that God loves us as we are and doesn't want us to change. People often say this when they want to justify particular types of behaviour, but the argument doesn't work. When the blind and lame came to Jesus, He didn't say, 'You're all right as you are'. He healed them. They wouldn't have been satisfied with anything less. When the prostitutes and tax-collectors came to Jesus, He didn't say, 'You are all right as you are.' His love reached them where they were, but His love refused to let them stay as they were. In fact His love transformed their lives.

Nobody really believes that God wants everyone to stay exactly as they are. God loves serial killers and child molesters; God loves ruthless and arrogant businessmen; God loves manipulating parents who damage their children's emotions for life. But the point of God's love is that He wants them to change. He hates what they are doing and the effect it has on everyone else- and on themselves, too. Ultimately, if He's a good God, He cannot allow that sort of behaviour, and that sort of person, if they don't change, to remain for ever in the party He is throwing for his son.

That is the point of the end of the Parable, which is otherwise very puzzling. Of course, within the story itself it sounds quite arbitrary. Where did all these other guests get their wedding costumes from? If the servants just herded them in, how did they have time to change their clothes? Why should this one man be thrown out because he didn't have the right thing to wear? Isn't that just the sort of social exclusion that the Gospel rejects?

The Parables of Jesus do not work like that. The point of the story is that Jesus is telling the truth, the truth that political and religious leaders often like to hide: the truth that God's kingdom is a kingdom in which love and justice and truth and mercy and holiness reign unhindered. They are the clothes you need to wear for the wedding. And if you refuse to put them on, you are saying you don't want to stay at the party. Put it another way. When the servants invite anyone to come to the wedding party, the King has in fact given the servants the banquet costumes to ask everyone to put it on. But there is this one who comes and refuses to put it on.

Everyone who has been baptized has put on Christ. Hence every time when we are invited to the Eucharist we must make sure we have put on the baptism costume. Otherwise, the Eucharist means nothing and worse still, you will be like this guest, to be cast out completely.