

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Isaiah 25:6-10; Psalm 23 [22]; Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20; Matthew 22:1-14

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son

[Jesus said to the chief priests and the elders of the people,]

Mt 22:1 Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 2 “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. 3 He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. 4 Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’ 5 But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, 6 while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. 7 The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. 8 Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 9 Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ 10 Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

11 “But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, 12 and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. 13 Then the

king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ 14 For many are called, but few are chosen.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

In this parable, the main story seems to contradict the final paragraph! It is interesting to note that the same parable is found in Luke 14:15-24, but this time without the appendix, leaving us with the image of the kingdom of God open to all comers. Matthew’s version makes the parable “edgy” and uncomfortable to read.

Several expressions are to be found only or almost only in Matthew: outer darkness (Matt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30); gnashing of teeth (Matt 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28); friend (there are two words for friend in the NT, *philos* and *etairos*—Matthew alone uses the latter and also in an unfriendly way (Matt 20:13; 22:12; 26:50 [= Judas])).

All of this means that the final paragraph was added by Matthew to the text to speak to some situation in the community for which he was writing.

This editorial footprint is confirmed by the strange insertion of the story of a war in the middle of the parable. The very difficult v.7 produces a dissonant combination of nuptial and bellicose

Thought for the day

In the parables of Jesus, wedding feasts are mentioned from time to time. The original parable may have ended with the words invite everyone you can find to the wedding. The detail of the troops—highly unlikely as an actual part of a wedding invitation(!)—realistically portrays the later destruction of Jerusalem, which Christians looked back upon as punishment precisely for that rejection. The end is difficult for us today on a spiritual level. However, it is meant to provoke conversion in a possibly complacent church.

Prayer

Lord, we know that you love us and invite us to the wedding feast of the Lamb. Help us to respond to your love that we may be followers of your Son not only in name but also in fact.

imagery. (On a practical level, interrupting the gathering of guests by a mini-war would surely have created problems for those preparing the food!) In reality, this insertion is a further “allegorisation” of the text, bringing in an apparent reference to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD. Naturally, as this took place some forty years after the ministry of Jesus, it cannot have been part of the original parable. So, all in all, a lot of “interference” by Matthew to get the old parable to speak again to his community. He may be anxious that the story of the rejection of the original tenants (the Jews) and their replacement by the new tenants (the Gentiles) might lead to undue complacency and so he introduces the guest “not dressed” for the occasion. Hence the scary warning at the end: many are called but few are chosen.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) God is often called a king in the OT. It matters here that God is named not simply as a host but as a ruler. It is precisely as ruler that God will dispense justice at the end.



(ii) A feast is often used as an image of God's future "hospitality".

(iii) Wedding language is common the OT to refer to the God of the covenant, with God as the bridegroom and Israel as the bride.

KIND OF WRITING

We have again a parable, but a highly allegorised, even historicised text. It could indeed have a context in the ministry, as Jesus did address the rulers, but originally in a more simple way. Probably the earliest version lacked the theological details pointing to the cross and the outcome of Jesus' life.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) Other parables we have heard recently deal with similar topics—e.g. that of the weeds in the wheat. Again, at issue is a "church" question—what to do with those "in" but not "of". This was not an issue during the ministry of Jesus, but in the settled context of Matthew's Gospel is very much an issue. Just as in that parable, the message is do nothing—leave it to the Lord. Behind that, as we saw with the parable of the weeds and the wheat, lies the hope that people may change, so that our judgement of others is premature. At the same time, these parables do recognise a problem in the community.

(ii) The imagery of the feast occurs frequently in the parables and that in turn mirrors Jesus' own practice of open table-fellowship, a symbol of the Kingdom of God.

ST PAUL

"What then are we to say? Gentiles, who did not strive for righteousness, have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith; but Israel, who did strive for the righteousness that is based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling that law. Why not? Because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written,

"See, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make people stumble, a rock that will make them fall, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame. Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes." (Rom 9:30-10:4)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

The introductory words above constitute the commentary for this passage, but a word or two in some verses may not be out of place.

Verse 7 This unexpected interruption is most likely Matthew's reflection on the Jewish War and the destruction of the Holy City and the Temple.

Verse 10 This verse marks the transition to the final paragraph. Naturally the other version in Luke lacks the distinction "good and bad" and goes its own, also theological way: "Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'" (Luke 14:23-24)

Verse 14 This awkward, well-remembered verse is found only here in the New Testament. It represents the growth of a more stringent, even pessimistic view of the Kingdom, in some contrast with the parables of extraordinary growth.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Scripture often speaks of the kingdom of God as a banquet. It is not meant to be taken only as referring to life after death but it also shows how God wants us to be in our relationships with one another in this life. The image of people being at a meal where everyone is happy and welcome and where all hunger and

thirst is satisfied gets across the idea that God loves, accepts and welcomes us and wants us to make that experience available to one another. Think of times in your life when you have had "banquet" experiences and when you have felt accepted and loved?

2. The host enlists the help of his servants to invite people to the banquet. We are commissioned by the Lord to invite people to the banquet of the kingdom, to the fullness of life—as parents, teachers, friends, etc. What has it been like for you to play a part in leading others to a fuller life?

3. There are many ways in which we can reflect on the guests invited, e.g. a) The ones invited first all found excuses to refuse the invitation. How do you feel when someone turns down an invitation you offer? Have there been times when you have found excuses to refuse an invitation from the Lord, or from others? What effect did this have in your life, or on others? b) The second round of invitations when out to 'everyone in the streets, good and bad'. What is it like for you to receive an invitation, particularly when you do not consider yourself worthy of that invitation? c) Notice that the banquet of the kingdom is an inclusive one. When have you given an open, inclusive invitation to others?

4. As in the parable last week there is a message about being alert to invitations that offer a fuller life and the danger of losing out if we neglect to respond to such invitations. Perhaps there have been opportunities offered to you that you missed, and now regret. Think also of the blessings you received because you seized the moment and took an opportunity that presented itself.

5. The second parable puts the focus on how we respond to invitations. Some invitations are ones that challenge us to change, to conversion, to put on a 'wedding garment'. What has been your experience of changing in response to invitations?

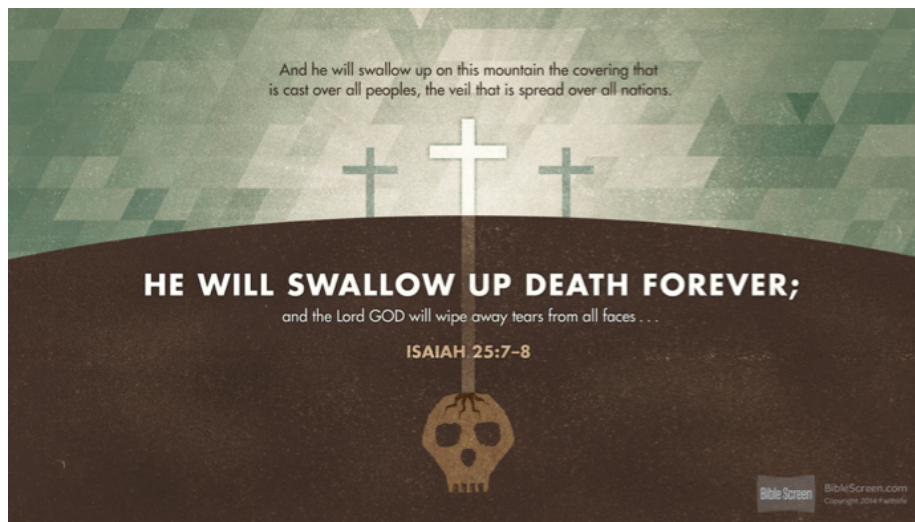
PRAYER

God of all goodness and kindness, you invite all peoples to the banquet and offer them a feast beyond compare.

Give us your saving grace to keep unstained the robe of our baptism until that day when you welcome us to heaven's joyful table.

We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.





OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

God as host at a banquet

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. (Psalms 23:5)

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips (Psalms 63:5)

Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts. We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, your holy temple. (Psalms 65:4)

I will abundantly bless its provisions; I will satisfy its poor with bread. Its priests I will clothe with salvation, and its faithful will shout for joy. (Psalms 132:15-16)

God who reverses

You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever. (Psalms 30:11-12)

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits— who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. (Psalms 103:2-5)

God who defeats death itself

Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead. (Isaiah 26:19)

“At that time Michael, the great prince who watches over your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress unlike any other from the nation's beginning up to that time. But at that time your own people, all those whose names are found written in the book, will escape. Many of those who sleep in the dusty ground will awake— some to everlasting life, and others to shame and everlasting abhorrence. But the wise will shine like the brightness of the heavenly expanse. And those bringing many to righteousness will be like the stars forever and ever. “But you, Daniel, close up these words and seal the book until the time of the end. Many will dash about, and knowledge will increase. (Daniel 12:1-4)

Present bitter situation

Now the LORD is about to lay waste the earth and make it desolate, and he will

- Isa 25:6 On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.
- 7 And he will destroy on this mountain the **shroud** that is cast over all peoples, the **sheet** that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up **death** forever.
- 8 Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the **tears** from all faces, and the **disgrace** of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.
- 9 It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.
- 10 For the hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain. *The Moabites shall be trodden down in their place as straw is trodden down in a dung-pit.*
- 11 *Though they spread out their hands in the midst of it, as swimmers spread out their hands to swim, their pride will be laid low despite the struggle of their hands.*
- 12 *The high fortifications of his walls will be brought down, laid low, cast to the ground, even to the dust.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This reading will be familiar to people, mainly from funerals, and it is easy to see why it is suitable. In the lectionary excerpt, it comes to a close in 10a on a resoundingly positive note.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Our reading comes from Isaiah of Jerusalem (chs. 1-39 mostly). That section can be outlined as follows:

- I. Is. 1-12 *Condemnation / Salvation*
- II. Is. 13-23 *Oracles against Foreign Nations*
- III. Is. 24-27 *Judgement on the world*
- IV. Is. 28-33 *Judah v. Assyria and Egypt*
- V. Is. 34-35 *Salvation for Judah*

VI. Is. 36-39 *Isaiah, Hezekiah, Jerusalem*

As can be seen from the context, the social conditions are dire and tremendous suffering has taken place. These conditions are alluded to in the verses added (10bc-12; not included the lectionary).

KIND OF WRITING

Isaiah 25:1-12 (the full reading) is a hymn in two parts. Part I takes in vv. 1-5 and 6-10a and part II vv. 10b-12.

The first part is positive; the second part begins well but deteriorates into local rivalry.

twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants. And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the slave, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the creditor, so with the debtor. The earth shall be utterly laid waste and utterly despoiled; for the LORD has spoken this word.

The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled, and few people are left. (Isaiah 24:1-6)

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

In its final verses, the Psalm takes up the imagery of hospitality. Each element is eloquent: banquet, oil, cup, house.

THE GOSPEL LINK

Even though at the hand of Matthew, the banquet is not necessarily a permanent refuge (!), nevertheless, Isaiah's theme is taken up by the Gospel.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 6 "On this mountain" suggests the universal rule of YHWH. The banquet takes place where the throne of God is (Is 24:23). Notice: *all* peoples.

Verse 7 The host makes a tremendous gesture in destroying not just any garment but the shroud of death. To swallow is often used of Leviathan or Tiamat, symbols of chaos and destruction. It indicates complete destruction. St Paul paraphrases vv. 7 and 8 in 1 Corinthians 15: *When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"* (1Corinthians 15:54-55)

Verse 8 At the start of the verse, the name of God changes to "my Lord YHWH," a more personal address as we move from impersonal metaphors ("shroud") to personal images ("face").

The two verbs are important here: to wipe away and to take way. Together with swallowing, the message is complete destruction. The five nouns are also powerful: shroud, sheet, death, tears and

disgrace. Notice that each one is qualified (in *italics* in the text). "The" in front of "disgrace" suggests a specific calamity: violence and upheaval as captured in Is 24 cited above. The royal edict of reversal is given as final. Cf. *"He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."* (Revelation 21:4)

Verse 9 This kind of hymn occurs elsewhere: Is. 33:2; Pss. 25:5; 40:2; Gen. 49:18; Jer. 14:22.

Verse 10 "On this mountain" serves to "stitch" this passage into its literary context ((24:23; 25:6, 7). When you read v. 10bc, it is quite clear why it is not chosen for the lectionary. Suddenly, we are back in local politics and power struggles.

Verse 11 This is quite satirical: God is achieving great things and puny Israel is concerned with humiliating a rival and neighbour. The word "hand" links with the praise which started in v. 9. Manual working of a manure pit will not avail against the hand of the Lord.

Verse 12 The hope-for reversal, illustrated in very concrete terms.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Go back to my own times of bereavement: what brought you through? Was there some moment of healing which you can recall?
2. God's hospitality is anticipated in the Lord's Supper when we sit at the banquet of life. We are not always conscious of this and yet it is profoundly real.

PRAYER

O God, you heal the broken-hearted: sent your healing touch on who who mourn and give us new hope.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Isaiah 25:6-10

Like much of the Bible, the main issue in this reading is life and death. The human tragedy is recognised and hope is given.

Second reading

Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20

St Paul was really resilient and self-sufficient. But, even he is grateful when the people of Philippi—his favourites among the churches—send him material help and support while he is in prison.

Gospel

Matthew 22:1-14

Our parable has some unlikely features, such as a war. However these features reflect history: the destruction of Jerusalem and parting of the ways between Jews and Christians. But even Christians can't presume...

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 13 October

Galatians 4:22-24, 26-27, 31-5:1

The argument here is dense. The main idea is that Christians are the spiritual descendants of the free-born wife (Sarah). Because she is free, her descendants too should be free from the Jewish Law. Hence the wonderful last line of the reading.

Tuesday 14 October

Galatians 5:1-6

Paul teaches that Christ has set us free from the burden of the Law; there is no going back. On the contrary, "what matters is faith that makes its power felt through love."

Wednesday 15 Oct St Teresa of Avila

Galatians 5:18-25

Two ways of living are contrasted here, in graphic terms. No one is completely one or the other; nevertheless, the direction we should take is clear: "Since the Spirit is our life, let us be directed by the Spirit."

Thursday 16 October St Gall

Ephesians 1:1-10

If we were to name all the gifts we have in Christ, how would we begin? In this prayer from Ephesians, the writer blesses God again and again for all he done for us in Christ.

Friday 17 Oct St Ignatius of Antioch

Ephesians 1:11-14

What is it that marks out the Christian believer? Who am I as a follower of Jesus? This reading names who we are and invites us to embrace our identity.

Saturday 28 Oct St Luke the Evangelist

2 Timothy 4:10-17

The name appears three times in the NT (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Phlm. 24), *traditionally* identified as the author of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. This somewhat despondent reading mentions Luke.