

For a number of weeks we have been following Matthew's account of Jesus' disputes with the Israelite leaders concerning his Messiahship. In the parable of the two sons, one of them did the will of his father, and the other (Israel's leaders) did not. In the parable of the wicked tenants, the owner's son was killed when he came to collect the rent on the vineyard. In the parable, God was the owner of the vineyard (Israel); Jesus was the son whom the tenants killed. Today's parable, about a wedding banquet, has a similar theme. The Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus says, is like a king who sent out invitations to a great wedding feast for his son. The would-be guests made excuses as to why they could not attend. Some of them mistreated or even killed the king's servants who had brought the invitations (parallel to the parable of the wicked tenants). So the king destroyed the refusniks' city. He sent invitations to people in the streets, and the banqueting hall was filled with all kinds of guests (the parable calls them the good and the bad). At that point we encounter one man who had not dressed up for the event. The king threw him out and said that he will be sent to the "outer darkness," with wailing and gnashing of teeth. The parable ends with the dire warning, "Many are called, but few will be chosen."

Luke also tells a parable about a great banquet. I want to compare them before I try to explain Matthew's version of the parable. Luke's parable begins when someone says to Jesus, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God." Then Jesus tells the story as follows. Someone (not specified as a king) gave a great dinner and invited many guests. As in Matthew's story, the original guests made excuses not to come. So the host told his servants to go out and bring in whomsoever they could find, the poor, the crippled, and the lame. The story ends with the host saying, "None of the original invitees will taste my dinner."

The explanation of Luke's version of the story is straightforward. Everyone is invited to God's Kingdom, but some choose not to accept the invitation. That is their choice. The Kingdom is open to all, and entry does not depend on rank – of being well connected, or wealthy, or successful in the eyes of the world. On another level, the parable identifies the House of Israel as the original invited guests, God's Chosen People. When the Jewish leadership rejected Jesus, God opened up membership in the Kingdom to Gentiles as well as the Jews. The fits with the belief that Luke wrote his Gospel for a primarily Gentile audience.

In contrast, Matthew's Gospel is thought to have been written for Christians who were converts from Judaism. Most Biblical scholars think that Matthew and Luke wrote their Gospels independently of each other, but clearly, both of them knew of a story that Jesus told about a great dinner. Luke told the simpler, and probably more original, version of the story. Matthew very likely reinterpreted that simple story, using an authentically Jewish approach, called 'midrash.' This means re-explaining, expanding on, or commenting on a Scriptural text. Now the host of the dinner was a king, and the banquet was for his son. We immediately recognize them as God and Jesus. Again, the people who turned down the invitation are the Jewish leadership. The slaves who brought the invitations, but who were ill-treated and killed by those who did not accept the invitation are the Hebrew prophets and/or the early Christian martyrs. The city that was destroyed in revenge represents Jerusalem, which was razed by the Roman general Titus in 70 CE, about 15-20 years before Matthew's Gospel was written, but after Jesus' lifetime. For Matthew, the destruction of the Temple, and the whole practice of

Temple worship, represented the Temple leadership's punishment for rejecting Jesus. In other words, Matthew reworked and reinterpreted the original story in the light of more recent events.

There are a couple of odd notes in the story as retold by Matthew. Why does the king take the time to go and destroy the city of the murderers (Jerusalem) while the oxen were already slaughtered and ready to eat (there was no refrigeration in the 1st century!)? Since the story is a parable, perhaps it is irrelevant to ask the question.

But who is the man with the shabby clothes who was not welcomed? He just pops up out of nowhere. He is an enigma to me. One explanation I read suggests that the king (God) was angry because he was disrespectful by showing up to the wedding banquet improperly dressed. That explanation makes no sense to me. Perhaps he was poor and had nothing better to wear. Or perhaps the invitation to come right away left him no time to go home and change. Either way, why was he rejected? My understanding of the Gospel message is that God chooses (or invites) everyone, regardless of status or wealth or fine clothes – different from 'many are called but few are chosen,' as the text has it. Another explanation I found was that Matthew switches mid-story from the here and now of the 1st century to the age to come. The shabbily dressed man is not clothed in righteousness, and so he will be denied entry to God's Kingdom. I still don't get it!

However, the shabbily dressed man reminded me of a story about the Rector of a prosperous, middle class parish. I do not know whether or not it is true, so it may be a modern parable. The Rector wanted to show his parishioners how difficult it is to live out Jesus' teaching to accept everyone. So he didn't wash or shave for several days. He sidled into church on Sunday dressed in smelly, ragged clothes just as the service was beginning, and sat at the back. Everyone ignored him, including the greeters, who didn't know how to deal with this situation. The service started; the robed choir and the deacon processed up the aisle. When it came time, the deacon read the Gospel and then sat down. To everyone's surprise, the ragged man got up from his pew at the back of the church, and shuffled awkwardly up to the pulpit. Only when he began to speak was he recognized as the Rector. His text came from the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor."

I need to finish by contrasting the pessimistic message of today's Gospel with what Paul wrote to the church he had founded in Philippi. The Gospel tells us that many are called but few will be chosen. I can only hope that this does not mean that God's standards for the Kingdom are so exacting that most of us will fail – that many of us are called, but few will be chosen. It reminds me of university professor colleagues who set such tough first midterm exams that almost all the students fail, in hopes of getting the students to work harder. Many students decide to drop the course instead. Paul is much more positive. He tells the Philippians to rejoice always. In his words, "Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything but let your requests be known to God by prayer and supplication. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." Here Paul acts as the professor or teacher who encourages the students, so that they complete the course and get a passing grade. "Don't worry; everything will turn out OK. Just trust in God." It is a wonderful pep-talk for any small congregation that worries about its viability in a society that is indifferent or hostile to the Gospel message. St. George's is not the first Christian community to feel despondent or overwhelmed, and it will not be the last. But, says Paul, "Rejoice don't worry; everything will turn out OK. Just trust in God."