

## Text

Matthew 22:1-14

## Sermon

The text assigned in the Lectionary for this Sunday follows immediately on the text of last Sunday, and it has many similarities with it. You'll remember that last Sunday we heard the parable of the tenants, in which a man builds up a vineyard, and then moves away and lets the vineyard to tenants. The next year, he sends servants to get the rent due to him, but the tenants maltreat and kill his servants. He sends other servants, with the same results. In the end he sends his son to the vineyard, but the tenants kill the son. Well, in one way this is a very simple parable; we all understand that the vineyard owner is God, that the son is Jesus, and so, that a terrible fate will await the evil tenants. Who are these evil tenants? In the text, it is explained that the religious leaders of Jesus's time, the chief priests and the Pharisees, understood this story to refer to themselves; they were the people who were ruling God's vineyard, and a terrible fate would await them. They would have liked to arrest Jesus, but they were afraid to do so because Jesus was regarded as a prophet.

In today's story the main character is again God. Here he is a king who is organizing a wedding banquet for his son. Twice he sends his servants out to invite people, telling them: The dinner is prepared the oxen and fat calves are slaughtered, and everything is ready. Please come! But the invited people pay no attention and continue with their own affairs. On top of that, they maltreat the king's servants and kill them.

The flow of the story is interrupted here; for the moment, the wedding is forgotten and the king in his anger sends troops to the city who destroy the murderers and burn the city.

This an unrelated piece of text, because in the next sentence the wedding banquet is still being prepared. The king is angry because his guests did not appear, so he sends his servants out again to go into the streets and invite anybody they can find – both bad and good, as the text says. That way the wedding hall is filled with guests.

It is not hard to see in this a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies, which happened in the year 70 AD, around the time Matthew's gospel was put together. Some even think that Matthew, or the final editor of the story anyway, means this as an attack on the Jews; they rejected God's glorious invitation, and therefore they are punished by the destruction of Jerusalem, and the banquet is then for the non-Jews – later the Christians – and not for them. But to me focusing on the various groups in the background is not very appealing.

But the story is not over yet. A strange thing happens, that is difficult to interpret. Among the new guests, the king sees a man without a proper wedding garment. The man is unable to give an explanation, and so the king has the man cast into the outer darkness where, in the picturesque words of the text, there will be "weeping and gnashing of teeth". Jesus concludes the story with the mysterious words: "many are called, but few are chosen".

What does this mean? One theory is that, in such a grand feast, the king might have provided everybody with a wedding garment; then it would of course be a tremendous insult to the king not to wear it. But that would be a very obvious, even a rather trivial story.

We should focus more on all the allegorical elements in the story. The wedding banquet stands, of course, for the end time, when God will bring this world of ours to a glorious conclusion. Jesus tells us many times to be prepared for this event and to be always ready for it. As he says in Chapter 24:42: "*Stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming*". Now the man without the wedding

garment stands for an unprepared person. A person who has paid no attention to the glorious invitation, like the people at the beginning of the story. Or a person who has understood the invitation, but who has not taken it seriously. He has not taken the trouble to study the scriptures and listen to the word of God, let alone put it into effect. Or – and now we are entering a truly speculative realm – he somehow has not been clothed with the glorious body that we are promised to have at the end time.

No explanation given in the Bible, only the mysterious words: *“many are called, but few are chosen.”* What does that mean? Christians have worried about these words for centuries. Elaborate theories have been developed, such as that of “double predestination” – the idea that not only God has determined beforehand who is going to heaven, but also who is going to hell, and that there is nothing you can do about it. Oddly enough, it can lead some Christian groups to think that, even though you cannot know if you are going to heaven or not, they are secretly convinced that their group has been chosen and is going to heaven, and that everybody else will go to hell.

What is for sure is that, as the Oxford Bible Commentary puts it, “Christian readers, who necessarily identify with those at the King’s banquet, cannot read the text and feel self-satisfaction.” That may be the intended meaning.

In our heart of hearts we know that it is quite possible that we will be found without a proper wedding-garment. To face such a dreadful possibility we should not rely on satisfaction in our own record; our only hope lies in the infinite mercy of our Lord Jesus the Christ, who, as it says in Chapter 18:13, *“if he finds [his lost sheep], ...rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.”*

Amen