

Hymns: 313 "Thine be the glory"
26 "I rejoiced when I heard them say"
693 "Beauty for brokenness"
682 "God of grace, God of glory"

Readings: Isaiah 25.1-9
Matthew 22.1-14

"What not to wear"

Matthew 22.1-14

Prayer – Break your word among us as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips, and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

"On this mountain the LORD of hosts will prepare for all peoples a feast."

Today's Gospel is set during the extraordinary week after Jesus had entered Jerusalem on the donkey, welcomed with loud hosannas.

He's already overturned the tables in the temple, has had several scrapes with the Pharisees and Sadducees, and is now at the Temple.

Here he's teaching, offering parable after parable, though each seemingly more tangled and violent than the last – we've had the parable of the two sons, and that of the wicked tenants; now we have the parable of the wedding banquet.

When we read the Gospels we should remember that St Matthew the evangelist wrote some 40 or 50 years after these events.

The Temple, where Jesus had sat, was already a tragic memory, a desperate wound of mass violence for the first hearers of the Gospel – for in the year 70 the Roman armies had sacked Jerusalem, and pulled down the Temple.

To this day only a part of one wall remains.

Of course, we shouldn't need iconic tragedies to stand as signs of the brokenness of the world – remember, on the day of the twin-towers disaster in New York City, how many babies died of dysentery, how many from malaria? – and yet iconic tragedies do take on extra significance – they become emblems of the fall, or indeed rise, of a powerful culture.

Consider our folk memory (or real memory for a few here) of the Blitz here in London, or the bombing of Coventry; consider Hiroshima.

There's no lack, in our world, of places with weeping and gnashing of teeth, there's no lack of outer darkness in which many folk spend and waste whole lives, places in which culture and art and learning and common humanity survive in memory only.

We hear a Gospel in which Jesus' hearers bear multiple wounds – the destruction of their Temple (the centre of their entire religious system), exclusion from their local Jewish communities, and then, to cap it all, persecution by the Romans.

These first-century Christians know about being cast out.

And we come to the parable – “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.”

Remember that a parable isn't an allegory to tell us what to do (some highway code for the Gospel drive, or is it a walk?), rather parables are mystery stories.

They start with familiar everyday things and then just when we think we know what's happening, there is some twist that makes us shake our heads as if we've suddenly been surrounded by bees– Did I hear that right?!?

Yes, mystery stories – the kingdom of heaven is like this, this king who gave a wedding banquet.

A banquet with those multiple invitations to the feast, the increasingly annoyed king – and, no doubt, exhausted slaves, running around – and then the hapless guest without a wedding robe, who's bound hand and foot and cast into the outer darkness, where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth.

You may've heard the story of the fiery Irish preacher and sometime politician, Ian Paisley, preaching on this... And there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

'Please, Mr Paisley,' cried a woman in the congregation, 'I don't have any teeth.' 'Teeth will be provided,' came his stern reply!

Is that what it's all about?

I want to join that vast company of believers beginning with those first-century Christians who'd seen the Temple destroyed, and ask what on earth (what in heaven) is going on here?

Because back earlier in Matthew, in that sermon on the other mount it was all *Consider the lilies of the field*, it was grace and righteousness and welcome – Jesus even said, “Do not worry, saying, What will we wear?” – and now I'm worried about not wearing the right robe and being thrown out.

Look around you in the pews – are any of you sure you've got the right clothes on this morning? Have I?

A few years back there was a television show in the UK, which went to the USA, called *What not to Wear*.

It was both horrible, and deeply compelling.

Trinny and Suzanna, the hosts, would choose a subject nominated for her dreadful fashion sense – let's call her *Wedding Guest A*, and would, with the help of her friends and relatives, take her whole wardrobe and hang it up for all to see, and then go through it with her.

They would offer a critique of her choices from underwear outward and upwards, and then agree so-called rules she could follow (things like no dropped waists or no puffed shoulders) before giving her £2,000 to go on a shopping spree.

Inevitably things started with the kind of undergarment my mother was glad to burn in the 1950s.

Hidden cameras would then follow *Wedding Guest A* to make sure she was following the rules – and if she started to break them – reverting to her poor fashion-choices of the past - then

Trinny and Suzanna would pounce out from their hidden camera-room and take her apart (gnashing of teeth and outer darkness starts to look a good option, compared to such a public humiliation on national television).

The whole show had its climax as *Wedding Guest A* would then have her hair done and make-up applied – the lilies of the field may have been clothed with splendour, but they weren't under such social pressure to hide their wrinkles and double chins. Lily of the field was ever subject to sexist social norms

for female beauty, in which being attractive, for a woman, means using makeup to get wide childlike eyes and the dewy smooth complexion of an adolescent.

Now *Wedding Guest A* would, of course, look terrific under the lights, and all would cheer and weep with joy, and exclaim, and any gnashing of teeth was just the grimace of someone who's been in a corset for more than twenty minutes.

And Trinny and Suzanna honestly wanted what they believed was the best for *Wedding Guest A*. Don't get me wrong – I have nothing against looking good, or taking care. Quite the reverse. The trouble is, we'd all watch, maybe we'd even take notes (literally or in our minds) and hope, woman or man, that we too could and should look gorgeous and appealing, and how better our life would be if we did. I may be wearing my cassock, but I still want to look great, and stride down the street with power and acceptance – as if looking appropriate to whatever dominant culture of our day would be the key to eternal welcome and well being?

Can I stride fast and sure enough in my appropriateness that I can walk right past all the folk hunched by the Tube station with their begging cups? Walk sure and fast enough, in my crisp and perfectly proportioned clothing, that I can forget for a while how many babies died of dysentery or of malaria today? Friends do you think we could walk just fast enough to outpace the sin of misogyny, or the waste of, often female, human life through limited education, opportunity. And the related sins of racism, of ethnic and religious bias, of homophobia, and all the rest. Am I really dressed right for the wedding feast?

The prophet Isaiah said that “On this mountain the LORD will make for all peoples a feast of rich food,” there will be well-aged wines. He said that God “will destroy the shroud that is cast over all peoples,” that death, the final enemy, will be destroyed – the veil, all those veils and barriers and walls and externals (clothes and all the rest) that divide the people will be removed.

And all peoples will see and rejoice, and live, and feast.

Ah, and here's the parable...

Here's the parable for those early Christians who first heard it, literally here (for they were) on or very close to “this mountain,” this Jerusalem mount where their hopes had once stood, where the Temple and all their certainties had been expressed. On this mountain, where you think you'd lost it all, God's wedding feast for all will be held, all will be welcome, and death will be destroyed.

And (here's the parable, here's that mysterious tale that now seems to have meaning) Jesus said, the kingdom of heaven is just like this. It's a wedding feast to which *all* are invited.

Friends, Jesus never called us to be appropriate. He called us to be Christlike.

What about that wedding guest with the wrong robes, back in Matthew 22? How are we to understand Jesus' parable, and understanding, let it convict our sin and lead us to redemption?

Well, what is the wedding garment, with what does God clothe us, to make us ready for the feast?

Generosity of spirit. Grace. Bearing with one another. Humility. The joy to forgive where we can. And knowing ourselves forgiven. Wisdom, gentleness, strength. Courage for change. A heart for the need of others and eyes that will not look away even when we are not yet at a solution.

You don't need Trinny and Suzanna, bless them - Because here is a secret about heaven – we don't wait till after death for it to begin.

It may be there are some things I wear, metaphorically, that will make it hard to accept the invitation to the feast – if we cling to our appropriateness and serve our pride, our toxic anger, our blaming and shaming, our walking by and ignoring need - but we are welcome and the clothes for the banquet are all gift.

And we shall be changed.

Remember, parables are not ethical allegories. They are mystery stories meant to shock us just when we thought we knew what was going on. Remember, the Temple had been sacked – Matthew's first listeners had been double, triply displaced.

Large, symbolic acts of violence can make people turn in and guard their memory, hoarding it and defending against the future. The difference for them, and for us, was that Jesus on his cross and from that empty tomb turned us outward, sent us forward, clothed us in compassion and joy. We do not need to hoard our memory of times gone past, but we can afford to give away the blessing of all we have known together, to anyone, to everyone who will come.

Friends I look around and I see you wearing those wedding robes - that clothing of wisdom, love, grace and compassion today – right now – and you are more beautiful than words can describe.
