



Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,
open our hearts, ready our minds
and fire our imaginations,
so that as we gather together before you,
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,
we might discover more of your goodness,
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us
on our journey into fullness of life.

Amen

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Have you ever found yourself needing to take a costly stand against something you knew was wrong? What happened?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

You are invited to use the text of Isaiah 25:1 – 9 as a prayer. At the end, the following conclusion may be used:

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.
Amen

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 106:1 – 6

Prayers of Renewal

God of abundance and generosity,
you call us to come to the heavenly banquet
clothed in the holy garments of mercy and justice,
and bearing the marks of walking humbly with you.

We bring to you those things for which we are sorry:
God of mercy, forgive us.

We bring to you the burdens we carry and sorrows we bear:
God of love, comfort us.

We bring to you the brokenness and oppression in our world:
God of justice, disturb us.

We bring to you the times we've hidden from the risks of love:
God of courage, fortify us.

We bring to you the failures of the Church to stand for justice:
God of liberation, convict us.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of abundance and generosity,
you call us to come to the heavenly banquet
and bid us taste and see that you are good.
Thank you that you set us free to follow you,
and to be ambassadors for your Kingdom of love. **Amen**

Reading Matthew 22:1 – 14

Sermon

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet is a very challenging text, both to grapple with and preach upon. I've sometimes imagined wrestling with the parables of Jesus as being a bit like trying to solve a Rubik's

Cube with every twist and turn mirroring the process of looking at a story from different angles, and following sensible steps to work our way towards a solution to the puzzle. Moreover, just as there's more than one way to do this, and the steps we follow will depend on both the strategies we use and the starting configuration of the Cube, so I would argue Jesus' parables are open to a range of interpretations, and can be read on multiple levels. However, most of the time, there is often at least *some* convergence between different commentators on the key questions raised by a given parable. Today's passage is something of an exception in that there is a very wide divergence of viewpoints – from Tom Wright claiming that it is unequivocally about judgment, at one end of this spectrum, to Ira Driggers arguing there is no “practical lesson” to extract from this text, at the other extreme. Thus, one might be forgiven for being overwhelmed by the varieties of ways we could tackle the corresponding Rubik's Cube. So, where then might we begin, and what can we learn from today's reading?

Sometimes, it can be helpful to look at parallel versions of a parable in the other Gospels, and there is a semi-similar parable within Luke 14:15 – 24. However, that story does not contain any of the violence that makes Matthew's version so problematic. If Luke's banquet tale is rather like *Mamma Mia*, then Matthew's equivalent is *Mamma Mia* gone horribly wrong, with a riot on the island resulting in murder and one of Meryl Streep's character's three former lovers – and possible candidates for Father of the Bride – being thrown into the sea during the wedding reception! Spending any time with the details of today's parable shows how implausible the storyline first seems... However, before we dive into the nitty gritty, we need to step back and explore the context in which Jesus tells this explosive tale.

The action takes place in Jerusalem, in what we now call Holy Week but was then the run-up to the Festival of Passover. As we saw with the two preceding parables, Jesus had been confronted by the chief priests and elders – in other words, by the Temple establishment –

who'd demanded to know by whose authority he had overturned the tables in the Temple courtyard the previous day and was now busily teaching large crowds gathered there to hear him speak, as he was regarded by many of them as a prophet (Matthew 21:46). This was, therefore, a confrontation between fellow Jews, and so needs to be seen in that context, rather than misread as evidence that God does not have an ongoing relationship with Judaism and Jewish peoples. Whatever else this parable might be, it isn't claiming that the Church has replaced the people of Israel. Moreover, Matthew is passionate about Israel and God's faithfulness to Israel, as the most overtly and confidently Jewish of the Gospel writers. However, the communities for which he was writing were having quite a hard time following the destruction by the occupying Roman forces of the Temple in 70 CE. Tensions in synagogues were high, as people sought to reestablish a sense of identity following the burning down of the capital city.

With that backdrop in mind, informing our strategy as we start trying to solve the Rubik's Cube of this parable, let's take a look at the text itself. It's usually assumed that the wedding banquet points to Jesus – as God's Son and Israel's Messiah, and the Church's bridegroom – being properly celebrated and recognised. However, although lots of us would clear our diaries if we received a royal summons to party and enjoy lavish hospitality, everyone refuses (22:3)! In a culture in which honour and shame dictated how things worked, this would've been deeply shameful for the king, says one commentator. It could, however, have reflected the normal practice of issuing invites twice, which allowed potential guests to find out who else was coming and check that arrangements were to their satisfaction, argues another. Even after being personally approached, and told how amazing the banquet would be (22:4), some neglect the king's hospitality (22:5), in favour of going about their everyday business, but others turn on the messengers and go on to brutally murder them (22:6). Now, this whole situation sure escalated quickly, and that is quite strange...

All of this begs the question: what's going on here? Some claim the servants represent the Hebrew prophets and John the Baptist; they had, after all, met violent ends. Others argue that Matthew is looking at the suffering of those in his own community. Either way, this king responds in kind (22:7), burning down his own city, perhaps through having run out of patience, or maybe out of a need to restore honour for himself. Either way, one of those few details most commentators do agree upon is that this evokes the destruction of Jerusalem, and reflects an understanding that this was as a consequence of having rejected Jesus and his call to renew Israel to be God's people. Amid the presumably still smouldering ruins of the city in this parable, the king sends his servants to bring in all-comers from its poorest parts, as replacements for those 'unworthy' guests, who rejected the initial invitation (22: 8 – 10). The king eating with commoners like that was quite remarkable, as in the culture of the time, it implied being equal to them, but were they the sinners and sex workers and so on which Jesus spent most of his time with (Wright) or the leaders of the early Church (Driggers)? Once again, the parable doesn't make it clear... Jesus seems determined to offer more questions than answers!

Perhaps the final section of Jesus' story is the most disturbing of all. Whilst Matthew made a strong connection between God's Kingdom and Israel, they weren't equivalent and (as in several other parables recorded in his Gospel) there needed to be a sorting. It is more than a little unfair to eject someone who had been hauled in off the street for not having a wedding robe on, we might think, but it seems pretty clear that this section's more an allegory (22:11 – 14) than a realistic drama. But if so, who does the speechless man represent? Could it be Judas (it would make sense of the king addressing him as 'friend' like Jesus did with Judas, in Gethsemane), or complacent members of Matthew's community needing a wake-up call, or believers falling short of the high standards of righteousness expected of Christians, or the Jewish leaders who refused Jesus's summons, or even those

who failed to come festively to the banquet of the Kingdom (Barth)? Maybe Matthew had several of them in mind. Again, we don't know.

At the end of all of that, what are we left with? – many possible ways to solve the Rubik's Cube of this parable, and no really obvious way to adjudicate between multiple explanations for what this dystopian version of *Mamma Mia* is getting at here. I'm not convinced Wright's correct to posit a clear meaning (and there is an undercurrent within his commentary which arguably reflects the debates in the Anglican Communion about human sexuality, at the time he was writing), and yet I am not sure I can agree with Driggers that there's no take home message here and that we might as well just throw the Rubik's Cube away! Instead, I'd like to leave you with another, and rather different, way of viewing the parable. You see, I cannot help but wonder if the problem is that we've been reading from the *centre* (establishment) position, rather than reading from the *margins*, and thus, maybe this parable is less *Mamma Mia* and more like *The Hunger Games*...

What if nobody wants to come to the wedding banquet for the king's son because he is a tyrant, and the feast a reminder that his dynasty is unlikely to go away soon? Perhaps he represented the occupying Romans and their Emperor, whose envoy (Pontius Pilate) was there in Jerusalem at the same time as Jesus. Could it be that the wealthy could avoid the banquet and get away with making excuses, but the poorest felt they had no options but violence? We know the Romans decided to destroy the city and its Temple because they grew weary of putting down violent rebellions. Were the gathered-up population forced to be there, and was that speechless man protesting through non-violent direct action by refusing to wear a wedding garment? Is it simply a coincidence that, a few days later, Jesus would keep his silence when the religious establishment put him on trial, before the authority of Rome consigned him to that outer darkness of Golgotha (which really was a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth!) at their dreadful behest?

Now, I cannot prove that this reading is what Matthew intended, any more than I may judge between the various interpretations I've tried to outline here. However, I think there is some good, if difficult, news to be found here. If my reading is on the right track, it reminds us of God identifies with the marginalised and oppressed, with those who have been cast into the outer darkness for things such as making a stand for human rights, the rule of law and the value of all people in the eyes of God. In a world in which such things are all too often not respected, this is something that certainly needs to be said and thus the Parable of the Wedding Banquet is anything but irrelevant...

Recommended Resource of the Week

Matthew and the Margins – A Socio-Political and Religious Reading by Warren Carter (2001) reads Matthew's Gospel from a liberation theology perspective and offers a fresh take which challenges more conventional approaches.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord's Prayer

Blessing