

## 20141012EighteenthAfterPentecostSermon

There is a lovely story of a minister preaching a children's sermon one Sunday and being a good teacher he had visual aids. He brought out from his magic box of tricks a stuffed toy squirrel. "Right, children, what do you think this is?" Silence from the children. No one said a word. "Come on children," he encouraged, "surely you know what this is?" Still silence. Finally a little boy stuck up his hand and said, "I know I'm supposed to say Jesus, but it sure looks like a squirrel to me."

Look at the opening of the parable: *Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: <sup>2</sup>The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.* With an opening like that I'm sure most, if not all of you (me included) thought that the King in this parable must be God and the wedding banquet was for his Son, Jesus. So, is this what Jesus wanted his hearers to think? Or 'did it sure look like a squirrel' to them? In other words, was this King nothing more than that, just a human king?

You see, my reason for asking this question is that as the parable develops, that King does so pretty awful things – things I not sure I would be happy about my God doing. Would the God we worship really become enraged to the extent that he would send his troops, to destroy the murderers of his messengers, and burned their city? That seems the exact opposite of what I was saying last week. In last Sunday's gospel we heard how the messengers were also murdered that time by the tenants of a vineyard and in fact, so was the landowner's son. I said that the response from Pharisees to this was as expected; the landowner would put those wretches to death and place new tenants in his vineyard. I said that we expected Jesus to say, "Yes, that is the right answer." But he didn't. I said God doesn't exact vengeance but gives mercy. But, in today's Gospel, here is God – if the King inviting people to his son wedding banquet is God – taking revenge and destroying those who didn't accept the invitation and had murdered his messengers and this king goes further and destroys their city.

Is this the kind of God we worship? Or is the King just what Jesus said he was, a king? I did some research on this passage. Firstly, we must remember that we cannot take a short passage out of context from the rest of the event. It was two Sunday's ago when we started this debate between Jesus and the Pharisees in the temple. And Jesus laid down the criteria of the debate by asking them if the baptism of John came from heaven or was of human origin. You see this whole debate is a controversy over authority, and Jesus himself poses the parameters in terms of a contrast between things from heaven and human things. So perhaps then, "a king" is meant to steer us away from seeing this character as God and see this 'king' as I think Jesus meant us to see him: as an example of the worst kind of brutal dictator, who would even fill his banquet hall for a joyful occasion by using lethal force and terror. He doesn't just kill the first invitees who turned him down. No, he makes a big show of it by also destroying their city.

So, of course, the second round of invitees come! They've just seen what this king does to those who turn him down! This parable of the tyrant king represents the collision in history of two brands of authority: our earth type of authority based on violence and the heavenly type which gives itself over to our violence but cannot be vanquished by it. What I'm trying to say here is that we, as Christians are not immune to earthly violence but it does not overcome our faith.

Now this leads us to a second controversial part of this parable and that is the man without a wedding robe who is thrown out of the wedding banquet for not dressing appropriately in a wedding robe.

I distinctly remember my late mother muttering about how unfair it was for that poor man. "Perhaps," she said, "he could afford one. Why should he be punished?" The man at the end of this parable, who is not dressed in proper apparel, actually stands out as a singular character who is in opposition to the king. Notice how he remains silent in the face of his ranting accuser – the King, and lets himself being bound and thrown into the outer darkness. Who else was silent in the face of accusations, like this? Jesus. In the face of our earthly authority based on violence, he

stood silent in the face of his accusers and let himself be bound to a cross and thrown into the outer darkness of death.

Now this explanation might help us to see that the King referred to in the parable is not God but a typical tyrannical earthly King. But it doesn't explain much about that wedding robe-less man. So let's explore that for a moment.

As I researched this parable trying to find an argument acceptable to my late mother's complaint of the unfortunate wedding guest without a robe, I came across one of John Wesley's sermons entitled "On the Wedding Garment". It gives a good explanation for the man without a wedding robe but Wesley seems happy to understand the King as being God – opposite to what I just said but I think still worth sharing with you, what Wesley said.

Very interestingly, I discovered that Wesley understood the Wedding Robe to be the holiness that, according to the Letter to the Hebrews, we all should seek - "the holiness without which no one shall see the Lord" (Heb 12:14). Now, Wesley and his Methodist Christians attached great importance to holiness. For them a Christian life begins with Conversion followed by Baptism and moves on to Sanctification, making one holy – holiness to see the Lord.

Wesley says in his sermon: "...suppose a person of this amiable character to do much good wherever he is; to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, relieve the stranger, the sick, the prisoner; yea, and to save many souls from death: it is possible he may still fall far short of that holiness without which he cannot see the Lord." So what does Wesley understand to be the wedding garment, "the holiness without which no one shall see the Lord"? Wesley says: "In a word, holiness is the having 'the mind that was in Christ,' and the 'walking as Christ walked.'"

What Wesley does not say, but what we now know through our social criticism of the Scriptures, is that the wedding garment for such an event as Jesus describes would have been supplied by the host, by the king in this parable. Those arriving would have been issued the appropriate garment at the door. I, for one, did not know that until I found this in a commentary! I'm sure my mother didn't either. Maybe with this explanation she would have been more sympathetic to the parable. You see, if persons were in the party but not wearing the garment, it wasn't because they didn't have the garment. It was because they refused to wear it! So, it was such refusal of the "qualification" after acceptance of the "invitation" that resulted in this person being cast into the "outer darkness."

God freely invites all to complete salvation, not merely forgiveness of sin (which justification by grace) but freedom from its power (sanctification by grace), and provides both the grace and the means for us to experience both fully. The question for us is whether we will accept what God desires to give us, complete salvation, or whether we wish to accept only the pardon and not the deliverance from the power of sin and its consequences, eternal death. Are we accepting only the invitation to the banquet but not putting the wedding robe on? To refuse the sanctifying grace, offered by God, is to choose banishment into the outer darkness.

Thus the importance of "dressing up as Christ"; of having the mind of Christ, walking as Christ walked. Thus the importance of that wedding robe of holiness for us.

So the kingdom invites all, as Jesus says, both good and bad. And all sorts come and are welcome, both good and bad. Out of all these good and bad people who come there remains one, just one, without the garment the king had supplied for all to wear. "Many are called, few are chosen" is the pithy saying Jesus appends to the end of this parable. It's at least a bit ironic. Because in this story many are called, but only one is excluded! If you say yes to the invitation and the wedding garment, the celebration continues for you, no matter who you were before.