

# Invited to love

Romans 13:8ff.; Mathew 22:1-13

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## **Introduction**

Our expectation of what will happen tomorrow impacts our life today; this is a common rule in life. Those people who do live for today only, without taking into consideration what will happen in the future, are usually seen as foolish.

We study today for the exam of next week; we go to school to prepare for later; we decide now about our holiday next year; we work hard in order to make sure that tomorrow the fridge is filled and that in 25 years time, we will have a reasonable pension to continue filling that fridge.

In spiritual life, we must also prepare. In this season of advent, let us base our

actions of today on what we expect our Lord Jesus Christ to do in the future. He is coming again, to judge the living and the dead. A wise person is prepared.

## **1 The importance of being prepared**

Our Lord Jesus Christ told his Jewish listeners a story about a king who arranged a wedding for his son. Our Lord did this in order to warn the Jews in his days to respond positively to the Gospel invitation of God the King.

Many people were invited to the wedding feast, but one after another was too busy. Not with bad things – with decent business.

They had work on the farm, or in commerce. It is so easy to be busy with the important things of life, and to forget about the most important things in life. 'They made light of it.'

The early churches, when they heard and read these parables of Jesus, must have immediately understood that he was not just telling nice sweet Sunday school stories – he was predicting what would happen to Israel if as a nation, it would reject Jesus Christ.

In this context, William Barclay, a minister in the Church of Scotland in the last century, wrote:

Ages ago [the Jews] had been invited by God to be his chosen people; yet when God's son came into the world, and they were invited to follow him, they contemptuously refused. [William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* Vol II, NDSB (Westminster, 1975, 2001) p. 310]

St Mathew wrote his Gospel at a time when the Good News of Jesus Christ was spreading all over the Roman Empire; the missionaries of the Gospel were hindered by Jewish leaders who were intent on destroying the movement of Jesus Christ. One of the reasons behind their rancor was that they saw how many Jews in their synagogues became followers of Jesus Christ.

That our Lord Jesus was very concretely warning his own Jewish generation is clear from the fact that he describes how many of the messengers of the king would be treated badly, yes even killed by those who were invited. Peter and Paul, and almost all apostles were savagely killed – mostly by Jewish leaders, or instigated by Jewish leaders.

But when the king heard about it, he was furious. And he sent out his armies, destroyed those murder-

ers, and burned up their city. (Mat 22:7)

Jesus is alluding to the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 AD. The armies of Rome razed the city in a tremendous bloodbath.

Just months before that destruction, the Jews had fervently celebrated Passover in their Temple in Jerusalem - also quite a bloodbath actually. The Jewish historian Josephus writes that at that particular celebration, 256,500 lambs were slaughtered in the Temple as a sacrifice to appease God. The Jews were very religious but they had rejected the great Peace Offering given by God Himself: the Lamb of God.

But God is a God of mission, and He is not easily stopped... When Israel as a nation rejected his offer, he continued sending his apostles, no longer to Israel only, but to all nations.

Then [the king] said to his servants, 'The wedding is ready, but those who were

invited were not worthy. Therefore go into the highways, and as many as you find, invite to the wedding.' So those servants went out into the highways and gathered together all whom they found, both bad and good. And the wedding hall was filled with guests. (Mat 22:9-10)

Because the original invitees did not come, the servants invited all people - the good and the bad. The door was now wide open for the nations to come to the feast. And they did come in great numbers. What an invitation of grace, so completely undeserved. The invitation, in the words of William Barclay, 'came to them from nothing other than the wide-armed, open-hearted, generous hospitality of the king'. (William Barclay, *Gospel of Matthew*, p. 313). With arms wide open, he'll pardon you.

Jesus is predicting the wider missionary task of the Church. This is the Lord's program for world evangelization. First for Is-

rael, and later – in the past 2000 years – for the whole world, including Israel. And today, we are still in the midst of God’s mission effort.

We cannot think about the first coming of our Lord without thinking of the mission of God – to bring people to the love feast, to the wedding table.

And we cannot think about the return of Christ without thinking of this mission of love - to fill the house of God with people. That is the heart desire of God.

## **2 The grace of God in the Church**

In Jewish and Christian writings, the Kingdom of God is often compared with a banquet. Jesus had so many meals with tax collectors, sinners, and we know of his Last Supper. All these symbolize what life in God’s kingdom will be like. Eternal life with God is often portrayed as the most

joyous feast of love and fellowship.

We must be careful to not misunderstand the parable about the wedding banquet. In the parable, the people are invited to a meal - the Greek word is ‘Ariston’. That is the normal word for a meal like breakfast or lunch, but really not the dinner at a wedding feast. It is the meal that prepares people for the evening, when the real dinner feast is held. Is this not a great symbol of our Church and our Eucharist? It is not the final feast yet – but it is very intimately related to that great feast when the Bridegroom himself appears.

The actual wedding is still to come – but we already eat and feast in anticipation of that great dinner with our Lord when he returns. We already eat and drink from the ‘divine kitchen’ where the final dinner is being prepared.

This summer my 21-year-old daughter is getting married. What a feast of

joy and love that will be! In the morning, we will all go to the city hall to register the marriage legally, as we do such things in The Netherlands. Then with family and friends, we celebrate a lunch together; then we all go to Church for prayers and for blessings the marriage; and then, in the evening, the great feast! The lunch during that day is not the real feast yet – but we'll have a great time already, full of anticipation.

Have you been to many sad weddings? Our Lord God is inviting us to a wedding feast, a joyful event. And the day of preparation, while we await the king's son, the bridegroom, to appear, is also joyous with love and fellowship! The lunch at noon is already great!

To think of the Christian faith as a gloomy giving up of everything that brings laughter and sunshine and happy fellowship, is so completely beside the mark. If people reject the

invitation, they miss out ... on joy!

That joy of living in communion with our Lord God is something we want all people to enjoy. This is a direct outcome of our love for people. St Paul reminds us to love our neighbors; we have read this in his letter to the Romans (13:9).

The theologian William Hendriksen comments:

It is exactly spirit-wrought love, this alone, that is sufficiently powerful to cause a person to remove all obstacles and to love his neighbor, even though that neighbor is perhaps not a pleasant person! [...] Such love has its origin in God, for 'God is love'. [William Hendriksen, *Romans*, NTC (Grand Rapids, 1980, 2007), p. 440]

True love for your family, friends, colleagues, neighbors, even your enemies, ought to be expressed in a serious desire to make those people experience

the joy and the fellowship that only God can give.

True love is expressed in inviting others to knowing our Lord Jesus Christ, in asking people to come and participate in the meal that God offers here for us.

I believe that to invite people to Christ and his Church is a measure of the spiritual health of individual believers and of their Church.

The great days of the wedding of the King's Son is approaching. Make sure your Church is bursting out of its seams! And be involved in the mission of God worldwide! God wants the wedding hall to be packed!

### **3 Personal Assessment**

When the king entered the full wedding hall, he inspected his guests. In bygone times, often when a king hosted a feast, he would give each guest a festive robe, a caftan; the king in the parable of our Lord followed this custom.

But one guest did not wear the robe given by the king; what a grave insult against his hospitality! The king had the man severely punished...

We must be careful. We have seen how God judged his own Jewish people because they did not heed his Gospel call. But he also judges those who seem to respond to the call, but not with their whole heart, or for the wrong motives.

The door is wide open, but when people come they must bring a life that seeks to fit the love, which has been given to them. Grace is not only a gift; it is also a grave responsibility. We cannot go on living the life we had before we met with Christ. We must be clothed in a new purity, a new holiness, and a new goodness. As summarized by St Paul: clothed in Christ, clothed in love.

Just as among Israel, many refused to come, with all sorts of sloppy excuses, there are also people in the wedding hall, people in

Church, who are actually not ready yet. This is a serious matter. The city of Israel was destroyed, but for those in Church who are not prepared well, Jesus himself describes a similar fate.

St Paul writes that we have to be 'dressed well' for Church. To the people in the Church in Rome – mind you, not to outsiders! – he says:

Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.  
(Rom 13:12-14)

All people in the congregation in Rome were warned that they had to cast off the works of darkness, and put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Undress, and get dressed again. This was a message to the congrega-

tion in Rome, not to some evil heathens.

In his *Confessions*, St Augustine describes that when he was sitting in a garden in Milan, Northern Italy, in the summer of the year 386, a voice told him: *tolle, lege, tolle lege*, Latin for 'take up and read'. He picked up a copy of the letter of Paul to the Church in Rome, and he read exactly the verses we have just read. This shocked him so much, that the prayers of his mother Monica were finally answered. He became a Christian – and one of the greatest theological minds the Church ever had.

St Augustine said in one of his sermons that he believes that when the apostle Paul speaks of 'putting on the Lord Jesus Christ', he refers to the 'garment of righteousness' that each believer in Jesus Christ receives when he or she entrusts his or her life to him. (St Augustine, *Sermon* 90.4)

It is reasonable and Biblical to think that the missing robe in the parable of

Jesus signifies the same idea. When we appear before God, today in prayer, in Holy Communion, at any time of day, we can never bring him enough of our good selves to make up for our inherent darkness, sloppiness, sinfulness... What we bring is never good enough for a Holy God.

What Jesus brings, is quite enough.

St Augustine saw a direct relationship between the table in the feast of the parable we read, and Holy Communion. In the sermon I mentioned, he said:

All the faithful know the story of the marriage of the king's son and his feast. They know that the Lord's Table is open to all who are willing correctly to receive it. But it is important that each one examines how he approaches, even when he is not forbidden to approach. (St Augustine, *Sermon* 90.1)

We, Christians, have to examine ourselves; a wise

person, is well prepared. To meet with God, we must be clothed with Jesus Christ. His life, death and resurrection make us righteous and holy in the sight of God through faith.

But 'put on the Lord Jesus Christ' *also* focuses on our lifestyle. That is clear from how St Paul speaks about it. How we deal with pleasures and passions, with our possessions, with power. All this has to be ruled by love. The core characteristic of those who do away with darkness and who put on Jesus Christ, is love for all people. The righteousness that our Lord Christ donated to us, expresses itself in love.

Pope Gregory the Great, who lived between the years 540 and 604, told his own congregation in one of his sermons:

Since you have already come into the house of the marriage feast, our holy Church, as a result of Gods generosity, be careful, my friends, lest when the king

enters, he find fault with some aspect of your heart's clothing. [...] We are correct when we say that love is the wedding garment because this is what our Creator himself possessed when He came to the marriage feast to join the Church to himself. (Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, 38.9)

The garment of the righteousness of Christ is also the garment of love.

**Conclusion:**

One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit feasts in himself in majestic relations of love. Love is the heart and the life and the mission of God our Creator.

And Christians, who are attached to Jesus Christ, participate in that eternal feast of love. A feast we look forward to, and a feast we already experience to a certain extent today.

Our Advent expectation of the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ moves us to examine ourselves before the Lord our God. In love he sought us; do we reflect that love?

And one sure sign that this love truly fills our heart is to what extent we participate in the mission of our Lord.

The mission to be a candle in the darkness, the mission to call more people to the feast, to Jesus Christ, to the Church, to the table of the Lord.

**+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit - AMEN**