



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, October 9, 2005
The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Choral Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector

on
Isaiah 25:1-9 and
Saint Matthew 22:1-24

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THE WEDDING GARMENT

Many are called, but few are chosen.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen

About fifteen or twenty years ago, there was a beautiful Danish movie called *Babette's Feast*, based on a story by Isaak Dineson, about an austere Protestant religious community in remote early nineteenth century Jutland in the north of Denmark. The story culminates with a glorious banquet prepared for the aging and by now spiritually sclerotic community by Babette, a superlative French chef who has taken refuge at the community from political turbulence in France. Just as unlikely as the setting for this banquet are the guests at the table, and a surprise visitor from the past, all of whom experience extraordinary reconciliation, sweetness and peace as they dine together -- truly the peace of God which passes all understanding.

The prophet Isaiah's vision of the messianic banquet of the Lord which we heard in our first lesson is part of a tradition which runs from ancient Israel into the Church and continues this morning here in the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. At the heart of the community of faith is a banquet in which the people feast on the graces and riches of the Lord.

Jesus' parable of the king's son's wedding banquet which we heard from Saint Matthew's Gospel focuses not on the food, drink and conversation of the banquet but on the invitations of the king and the responses of those invited. There are three acts in the parable's drama: two calls to those who were first on the list of invitations, and then an indiscriminate call to anyone, with a final sorting-out at the wedding party.

Assuming that this is a parable first about ancient Israel,¹ then the invited are presumably those whom the king would think of first, those who naturally would be high on the guest list -- priests, scribes, nobles -- Israel's leaders. These were called by the king's servants; "but they would not come." This causes a crisis, because everything is ready and the feast is at hand. The king issues a second call by more servants, and this time those invited make light of it all, go about their own business, and even respond with violence. It seems clear that the parable here speaks of the historic treatment of Israel's prophets by her rulers.

¹ This parable follows and is closely linked with Matthew's parable of the vineyard and the wicked tenants, immediately preceding in Mt 21:33-46.

The military retaliation by the angry king is thought by most commentators to be the destruction of Jerusalem by Roman armies in 70 A.D., either prophesied by Jesus, interpreted by Matthew, or both. But it could be earlier invasions, such as those by the Assyrians and Babylonians; the answer does not make a difference to the parable.

Now comes a fresh start in act three with a strange ending. Those on the king's list are replaced by a new invitation, and his servants are sent out into the thoroughfares to gather "as many as you find," "both bad and good." The wedding hall is now full of guests, and the king comes to have a look at them. One is a man without a wedding garment whom the king addresses, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?" He is speechless, and the king tells his attendants to bind the man hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness, where "men will weep and gnash their teeth."

This climax has caused generations of church people to wonder about the king and to sympathize with the guest without a garment. After all, wasn't he brought in at the last minute? There was no time to rent a tux.

Jesus' final comment on all this is "many are called, but few are chosen." To make sense of this, we are forced to consider what the wedding garment is, as we also remember the nature of the messianic banquet.

The Book of Common Prayer has some long exhortations to Holy Communion, and they allude to the king's wedding feast for his son. "Ye know how grievous and unkind a thing it is, when a man hath prepared a rich feast, decked his table with all kind of provision, so that there is nothing lacking but the guests to sit down; and yet they who are called...most unthankfully refuse to come."² Worldly excuses for staying away from Holy Communion are likened to those who refused the feast in the Gospel. And the "marriage-garment required by God in holy Scripture" is not a tuxedo, but *a right spirit*; that is, a garment of humility, charity, and forgiveness – truly and earnestly repenting of our sins, having love and charity towards our neighbor, and intending to live a new life following God's commandments. For those who need help putting on this garment, the Prayer Book recommends pastoral assistance or sacramental confession.³

Many are called. The invitations, although they begin with what we might imagine to be the list of the king's official friends, wind up going out to everyone. It turns out that *no one has a right to be invited. The invitation is a free act of kindness.* The king started out by being polite to those we would assume to be his old family and friends, but they showed themselves to be careless of the things of God.

When the old guard are replaced by "the bad and the good" from the highways and byways, then arises the issue of participation. "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us; therefore let us keep the feast," we say as our liturgy quotes the Apostle, who continues, "not with the old leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." I am saying, *to be without the wedding garment is to be at the feast without keeping the feast in sincerity and truth.* The expulsion of the guest without the garment is harsh and unjust if it is merely a sartorial matter. But if it is a matter of *spiritual clothing*, an issue determined by the intentions of the heart and discerned by the Lord, then it is in truth *self-expulsion*.

Many are called; in fact all are called, to the banquet of the kingdom of heaven. But, as Jesus observes, few are chosen, which means that although the king's invitation is a free act of kindness, participation in his feast demands our response. The old guard are not excused from this demand by their credentials. The new invitees are not excused either. To be invited is a gift of grace; to

² Book of Common Prayer, 1928, pp. 86-88..

³ Book of Common Prayer, 1979, pp. 316-317.

respond is a gift of grace as well. It is a gift to receive the invitation with a grateful and true heart, and to keep the feast with sincerity and truth. The invitation is universal, but participation is not automatic. What is necessary is openness to a grace in which we choose to take part.

May the celebration of the Holy Mysteries at Saint Thomas be a Communion of the Body and Blood of Christ, for every guest present, here and now, and reaching into the Heavenly Banquet, this morning and for all the ages of eternity. And to take part, let us cloth ourselves in the garment of Christ.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.