

**“FOLLOWING THE KING – 68”**

*Matthew 22:1-14*

June 21<sup>st</sup>. Forty years ago, June 21<sup>st</sup> was on a Saturday. Back on June 21<sup>st</sup> 1975 there were a couple of weeks to go until the end of term at university. Things were starting to wind down a bit and all kinds of fun was on offer. On that Saturday Elton John was playing at Wembley Stadium. He was top of the bill, playing stuff from his forthcoming album, *Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy*. Also playing were The Beach Boys, The Eagles, Rufus with Chaka Khan, Joe Walsh and Stackridge. The MC was Johnnie Walker. Tickets were £3.50 and on a blazingly hot sunny Saturday it was an amazing experience. Or would have been – I passed up the invitation to go along with my mates in order to watch the final of the first Cricket World Cup on television in which the West Indies beat Australia by 17 runs. It's a decision I have always regretted.

But we've all done it, haven't we? We've been invited to a party, a concert, a match, an event – and we've turned it down, then spent ages wishing we hadn't. That's what this story's all about – making the wrong call about an invitation. It's the third of the parables Jesus tells in response to the questions of the Jewish leaders about his authority and what he's doing. At the beginning of the last week before his crucifixion, Jesus has stormed into the Temple courtyard and ransacked the stalls of the traders who were – with the support of the authorities – turning a place intended for prayer and worship into a place full of commerce and profiteering. The Jewish leaders – priests and legal authorities – naturally want to know why he thinks he's got the right to do that and Jesus responds with a couple of enigmatic pronouncements and three stories which say something about his authority and about the Kingdom of God which he is starting to usher in.

This Kingdom of God – the sovereign rule of God – is all to do with the renewal, the restoration of a broken and dysfunctional creation. What God had created good has been distorted and perverted by the presence of sin and evil. Jesus has come to begin the process of setting things to rights, restoring dignity to humanity and mending the broken relationship between God and his creation. God has been promising that ever since the very first human beings started to go off the rails, and the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, is a record of his attempts to re-connect a disobedient and rebellious humanity with their benevolent and loving Creator. Throughout those scriptures, the prophets, poets and preachers who were appointed and inspired by God have been trying to get the message across to the Jewish people and have been pointing forward to the Messiah who will eventually come and sort things out. Matthew in particular has been at pains to show to his new Jewish converts through the pages of his Gospel that Jesus is that Messiah and that things are starting to move towards their climax.

And Jesus is, in this story, saying something very important about this Kingdom, something that everyone, but especially the Jewish people, needs to listen to. This is a parable, a story. It's pointing towards something, making a point. As with most stories, with most of Jesus' parables, not everything adds up. Jesus is making a point and that's the important thing. In fact, what we've just read has two interlocking parables within it. There's a very similar one in Luke's Gospel and also in the non-biblical *Gospel of Thomas*. But Matthew's account has Jesus talking not only about the wedding banquet, but also about this poor man who turns up in the wrong clothes. So let's have a look at what it might be saying to us.

A king's son is getting married and the king throws a banquet for him. Throughout the Bible the image of a banquet or a feast is used to portray the Kingdom of God. There's a lot about it in *Isaiah* and it's dotted throughout the books of the prophets, as well as sprinkled through the New Testament. The fulfilled Kingdom of God is going to be a celebration – it's fun! There will be extravagant provision for everyone to enjoy themselves. The Kingdom of God when it is finally complete is definitely something to look forward to. And in the New Testament, Jesus is often portrayed as a bridegroom coming to claim his bride – the Church. The Kingdom celebrates the rightful reunion of the Messiah and his people.

Anyway, people have been invited to this banquet and, according to the custom of the day, they've had their initial invitation, then a second invitation is sent out when the banquet is almost ready to begin. Once it's all set up and prepared, then servants go round to give the invitees their final reminder. And then a final, final reminder. You can see where this is going, I imagine. The whole of the Old Testament is an invitation to God's people, the Jewish people, to get involved in the life of the Kingdom. God's servants, the prophets, have been proclaiming that invitation for centuries. And now it is ready – the Kingdom is prepared and the Son is there waiting for the invitees to arrive. We've seen glimpses of this Kingdom in the life and ministry of Jesus as he has healed, liberated, restored, offered hope and dignity to the needy. All they've got to do is turn up. Remember that Jesus began his ministry with a clear mandate to call his own people into the life of the Kingdom: look at *10:6,7* – *These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'*"

The trouble is, just as was my experience 40 years ago today, the invitees decided to do other things – things that, in and of themselves, were quite legitimate: looking after their farms and businesses – but things that meant they couldn't be part of the banquet. They were actually snubbing the King. And he didn't like that one little bit, and he let them know. But with a banquet hall full of food and a band he was going to have to pay and a lot of trouble put into the decorations, the king wasn't going to let this all go to waste, so he sent his servants out yet again and this time told them to invite anyone they could find

who was just hanging around on street corners. The invitation was thrown open to anyone at all. All they had to do was turn up. And wedding venue was packed out.

Jesus has come announcing the good news that the great banquet of the Kingdom is now ready but the Jewish people – particularly, but not exclusively, in the shape of the leaders of the people – have turned down the invitation. They have made it very clear in their responses to Jesus and his ministry that they don't want anything to do with it all. They have other priorities, other concerns. So the invitation is now thrown open to anyone and everyone. It's no longer the preserve of the Jewish people alone. God's amazing grace, his astonishing love is being thrown open to everyone who wants to respond to the invitation.

That is wonderful news for humanity. Now there is direct access to the Kingdom for everyone. No-one need be left outside. The invitation is for all. The Jewish people are still invited, if they want to come along, but the Gentiles – you and I – are now able to be part of it all. No-one is excluded. What a great story! And we know that this hits home to the Jewish leaders. They can work out what Jesus is saying even more easily than we can.

We'd like to think, then, that this story communicates a kind of universalism, that everyone will be saved. No-one will be excluded from the Kingdom of God. But there's this little coda that Jesus adds in Matthew's version of the story. The king wanders round to meet his guests and comes upon a man in unsuitable clothes. Clearly he's made no effort to look smart for the wedding banquet and has turned up in his casual wear. He wanted to be part of the celebration, but hasn't really taken it very seriously. The king gives him an opportunity to explain, but the poor man is speechless, he can come up with no excuse. He's been invited in, but hasn't been prepared to change. So the bouncers are called and the scruffy little chap is heaved out of the event, and that's the end of it all for him.

Like the idea of the Kingdom as a feast and Jesus as the bridegroom, here's another image that crops up a fair bit in the Bible. It's this idea of being clothed in robes of righteousness – or in one place (*Galatians 3:27*), being "*clothed with Christ*". Again, it's an idea that runs through the Old Testament too – just one example: *Isaiah 61:10* – "*I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness.*" The universality of invitation doesn't imply universalism. The door is open to everyone – absolutely anyone can respond to that invitation to be a part of the Kingdom of God and to enjoy its benefits. But there are still choices to be made. As William Barclay puts it, "*The door is open, but the door is not open for the sinner to come and remain a sinner.*"

God has thrown open his invitation to become a part of the life of his Kingdom – to “be saved”, if you like; to find a way of escaping the consequences of your wrong choices and wrong decisions – and he has thrown that open to everyone. It does not matter who you are, or what you have done with your life up to this point. God’s grace is available to you. Step inside and enjoy the fun of the Kingdom, become what God originally intended you to be. But you still have to make some choices. You cannot stay as you are. Part of the nature of the Kingdom is transformation. You step into the Kingdom and clothe yourself in Kingdom clothing, in the righteousness of Christ. You have to accept that or you cannot stay. It’s a bit like trying to get into Après in trainers or turning up at the Queen’s Garden Party in a track suit. You’re invited – no question of that – but you’ve got to respect the dress code. I’d like to think that absolutely anyone is welcome in this church. I don’t think I’d want to turn anyone away. But once you’re in, you can’t stay as you are if you want to remain a part of it.

What Jesus is saying in this story is that the Kingdom is now up and running. It’s not yet reached its fulfilment, but the doors are now open. And those doors are open for everyone. No-one is excluded from taking up the invitation. There is nothing that can debar you from accepting. But once you’ve accepted that invitation, once you’ve taken the decision that that’s where you want to be, then you need to start living the Kingdom life, living as a disciple of Jesus, clothed in his righteousness. That means doing your best to look like him, to live like him. The unsettling truth is that, if you don’t, you won’t be able to stay.

You see, as Jesus says here, many are called into the Kingdom, but “*few are chosen*”. In other words, if you’re not prepared to take life in the Kingdom seriously, why should Jesus take you seriously? You cannot duck choices like that. You have to make up your mind that you will follow Jesus and live according to his values, follow his teaching, display his attitudes. Please don’t make a decision that you will regret.

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People have been invited to this banquet and, according to the custom of the day, they've had their initial invitation. Once it's all set up and prepared, then servants go round to give the invitees their final reminder. And then a final, final reminder. The whole of the Old Testament is an invitation to God's people, the Jewish people, to get involved in the life of the Kingdom. And now the Kingdom is prepared and the Son is there waiting for the invitees to arrive.

The trouble is, the invitees decided to do other things. So the king sent his servants out yet again and this time told them to invite anyone they could find who was just hanging around on street corners. The invitation was thrown open to anyone at all. All they had to do was turn up. And wedding venue was packed out.

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Another image that crops up a fair bit in the Bible is the idea of being clothed in robes of righteousness – or in one place (*Galatians 3:27*), being "*clothed with Christ*". (Look also at *Isaiah 61:10*) The door is open to everyone – absolutely anyone can respond to that invitation to be a part of the Kingdom of God and to enjoy its benefits. But there are still choices to be made. As William Barclay puts it, "*The door is open, but the door is not open for the sinner to come and remain a sinner.*"

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### **Questions for discussion**

1. What do you think the completed Kingdom of God will be like? Does that excite you?
2. Why do you think the Jewish leaders were so opposed to Jesus?
3. Are we supposed to think that God is as harsh with those who refuse his invitation as the king is in the story? Why/why not?

4. How can we best present the choices to be made to those who are not yet followers of Jesus?
5. How do you respond to this story?