

## Scripture Readings for October 11 2020

### Isaiah 25:1-9

LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done wonderful things, things planned long ago. <sup>2</sup>You have made the city a heap of rubble, the fortified town a ruin, the foreigners' stronghold a city no more; it will never be rebuilt. <sup>3</sup>Therefore strong peoples will honor you; cities of ruthless nations will revere you. <sup>4</sup>You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in their distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat. For the breath of the ruthless is like a storm driving against a wall<sup>5</sup> and like the heat of the desert. You silence the uproar of foreigners; as heat is reduced by the shadow of a cloud, so the song of the ruthless is stilled. <sup>6</sup>On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. <sup>7</sup>On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; <sup>8</sup>he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth. The LORD has spoken. <sup>9</sup>In that day they will say, "Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."

### Matt 22:1-14

22 Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: <sup>2</sup>"The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. <sup>3</sup>He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. <sup>4</sup>"Then he sent some more servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.'<sup>5</sup> "But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. <sup>6</sup>The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. <sup>7</sup>The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. <sup>8</sup>"Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. <sup>9</sup>So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.'<sup>10</sup> So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. <sup>11</sup>"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. <sup>12</sup>He asked, 'How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?' The man was speechless. <sup>13</sup>"Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'<sup>14</sup> "For many are invited, but few are chosen."

## Sermon: “Live a Life Worthy of God’s Grace”

Weddings! They are times of great joy and celebration - and not a little stress, particularly if you are intimately involved in organizing one! For those who are married, think back to the preparations of your own wedding. And for those whose *children* are now married, reflect on your pride and happiness on those occasions! Now picture the added sense of importance if the wedding is that of celebrity, or a tycoon’s heir, or a royal occasion. Let your imagination set the scene for our gospel reading this morning.

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet is the third in a series of three stories that Matthew has Jesus relating in the Temple forecourt.<sup>1</sup> Jesus was therefore coming to the end of his earthly ministry and he was talking to the Jewish religious establishment on their home turf in Jerusalem. Earlier, Jesus had overturned the tables of the money-changers proclaiming, “My house shall be called a house of prayer, and you are making it into a den of robbers.”<sup>2</sup> The Chief Priests reacted by questioning Jesus’ authority to do these things<sup>3</sup> and he responded with three parables that were thinly-disguised critiques of the Temple leaders. We heard one of those stories last week.<sup>4</sup> The religious leaders were enraged and so plotted to entrap Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Today, we too find this passage deeply disturbing because it ends with the dire warning of “being bound hand and foot and then being thrown into darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”<sup>6</sup> And we wonder what does this mean for *me*?<sup>7</sup> I’ll get to that later, but let’s *not* focus on the warning and lose sight of the *good news* in this parable on this Thanksgiving Sunday!

Jesus says that God’s kingdom is like a wedding banquet.<sup>8</sup> It’s a *joyful* celebration! It’s *good news*; it’s a party that you wouldn’t want to miss, particularly if it is the *king’s* party for his son. While this is a parable, the king obviously corresponds to God and the son is Jesus - this much is clear from the previous parable.<sup>9</sup> Second, we need to appreciate that in Jewish custom, the wedding invitations were sent out to the guests, but the *time* was not stated.<sup>10</sup> Later, when everything is ready, the servants were sent out with the final summons to tell the guests to come. We read that “the king sent servants to

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<sup>1</sup> See Matt 21:12-22:14. The triple emphasis is therefore one of warning to - and judgment of - Israel’s *leaders*.

<sup>2</sup> Matt 21:13, after which we are told Jesus healed the blind and lame, v14. See also Jer 7:11; Isa 56:7.

<sup>3</sup> Matt 21:23.

<sup>4</sup> The Parable of the Wicked Tenants; see: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A-Parable-of-Judgement-and-Hope.pdf> .

<sup>5</sup> Matt 21:45-46.

<sup>6</sup> Matt 22:13. This is *apocalyptic* (not literal) rhetoric pointing to the final judgement.

<sup>7</sup> I often say that the challenge of following the lectionary readings this so that preachers can’t dodge these awkward passages, ones that some might prefer to gloss over! But if we are to be faithful to the whole of Jesus’ message, as recorded in the Gospels, we need to face up to challenging passages as well as comforting ones.

<sup>8</sup> Matt 22:1. The notion of a messianic *banquet* is a common biblical image; this story links the occasion to a wedding. See also Mark 2:19-20; Matt 8:11-12; 9:15; 25:1; Rev 19:7-9.

<sup>9</sup> Matt 21:33-45, The Parable of the Wicked Tenants; see [4]. Matt 22:1 links the parables together. It is most significant that the kingdom of God/heaven is explicitly linked with *Jesus* as God’s son.

<sup>10</sup> In Matthew’s allegorical understanding, the original invitation corresponds to the call of Israel, who accepted God’s covenant.

those who had been invited,” which is obviously a reference to the Old Testament prophets as God’s messengers to his covenant people of Israel. But the people “refused to come” to the banquet. This is a terrible indictment of Israel; it’s tantamount to treason because they are not showing allegiance to their sovereign! Yes, it’s that shocking – and the religious leaders who heard it were furious! The story continues: The king is patient and does *not* retaliate when the people initially rebel, instead he sends a second group of messengers. These are not just Jesus and John the Baptist, but the disciples – since in the mind of Matthew’s *readers* the apostles later preached to the Jews in Jerusalem. The king is giving his very best for this wedding feast – he has “served the fatted calf.” The Jewish response is *still* to ignore the *king’s* invitation. Instead they are being distracted by the normal routines of life.<sup>11</sup> The audience would know that to decline such an invitation is *unthinkable* – it’s a *royal* wedding, the king’s *son* – and their lame excuses are doubly insulting. But it gets worse; some of the king’s servants are mistreated and killed. Matthew may be thinking about John the Baptist, and even reminding his *readers* of the later deaths of James and Stephen that we read about in the book of Acts.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the Jewish *leaders* do physical violence to God’s messengers, and not merely ignore them.

Then there is then a strange insert that scholars suggest is Matthew’s retrospective to his *readers* as it alludes to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, four decades later. Verse 7 says: “The king was enraged. He sent his troops, and they destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.”<sup>13</sup> Now it’s an odd thing to insert war and destruction here in the parable’s narrative, since the feast is all ready for the wedding banquet! But Matthew is attributing that later destruction of the Temple to *divine* judgement carried out, in this case, by the Romans. At least that’s how *Matthew* sees it!<sup>14</sup>

The parable continues: The king then deems those originally invited as not being worthy, so he tells his servants: “Go into the main streets and invite everyone you find, both good and bad.”<sup>15</sup> This not only is a reference to the kind of people Jesus hung out with, namely, tax collectors, sinners, and prostitutes,<sup>16</sup> but it’s a later reference to non-Jews. God therefore *circumvents* religious leaders, who *should* know better, and uses ordinary people – like the disciples - in extraordinary ways and through them others are welcomed to the wedding feast – including you and me!

Some scholars think the next few verses are part of *another* parable that Matthew adds on to this story, possibly a well-known rabbinical story with a similar wedding theme.<sup>17</sup> As it stands, it certainly raises

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<sup>11</sup> In Luke analogous version, many (silly) excuses are given for their absence; Luke 14:15-24, see also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-Upside-Down-Kingdom-of-God.pdf> .

<sup>12</sup> See Acts 7:54-60; 12:1-2. See also Matt 23:29–39 and the connection with 21:33-46. Moreover, Matthew’s *readers* would be aware that Paul and Peter were killed by the Romans, which is thought to have occurred in the mid-60s AD.

<sup>13</sup> Matt 22:7. Note that, from the parable’s perspective, the city (Jerusalem) is the *king’s* own city!

<sup>14</sup> Matthew understood the events of AD 66-70 as a judgment on rebellious Israel who had rejected God’s Messiah. This insert is a hint that this Gospel was written *after* AD 70, most scholars say between AD 80-90. (See also Isa 5:24–25.)

<sup>15</sup> Matt 22:8-10. See also the Great Commission in Matt 28:18-20.

<sup>16</sup> See Matt 21:31.

<sup>17</sup> Matt 22:11-14.

some questions, like: Why would a person who was invited off the streets be chastised for not wearing the right robes? Rather than seeking a literal meaning, I think it's best to look at its *theological* message.

In the early church, the Christian's new identity was often pictured as putting on a new set of clothes, a metaphor that means giving up one's old way of life and putting on the life of Christ.<sup>18</sup> This is symbolized in baptism. In other words, *clothes* are indicative of *character* and *behaviour*.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, when the king confronts the person for his lack of authenticity, the man is speechless because he has no defense. The person accepted the invitation of the gospel but refuses to change their life in response to its message. That's hypocrisy!<sup>20</sup> The judgment may seem harsh to us. But Matthew is thinking not of an actual wedding party here, but is warning of the last judgment. Moreover, it is a message *to his readers not to be complacent*, since many of them were from the *second* group to be invited to the wedding banquet.

One should therefore compare the man without the proper wedding clothes with those who were *initially* invited and who were ultimately proved unworthy. Both will receive the *same* sentence at the last judgement. Consequently, this parable is *not* about the replacement of Israel by the Church, or of Jews by non-Jews. The issue for Matthew is the replacement of those *unworthy* in Judaism - especially its leaders - by a broader, *inclusive* community of those who have come to believe in Jesus and have *worthily* responded to demands of *living out* the reign of God's kingdom.<sup>21</sup> It is a story about *responding appropriately to God's grace*. That being the case, the message is still applicable to us – both as an invitation and as a warning.

Let's spell it out. The *love* of Jesus reaches out to us *where* we are, whatever the circumstances we are presently in. But that same love, which propelled Jesus to the cross, refuses to let us stay *as* we are. That's because love wants the best for the beloved. Jesus wants to see our lives transformed, healed, and changed. God hates all the negative stuff we do and the effects our actions have on everyone else, and on our world - and on ourselves too. Ultimately, if God is a *good* God, he cannot allow that sort of behavior, and that sort of person - if they *refuse* to change - to remain forever in the party that he is throwing for his Son. The kingdom of God is a kingdom in which love, justice, truth, mercy, and holiness reign unhindered. These are the clothes of "righteousness" that you and I need to wear for the banquet. And if we *refuse* to put them on, we are simply saying that we don't want to stay at the party.<sup>22</sup> This is a sobering message for church *leaders* today – just as it was to the Temple elite in Jesus' day. But it is also for *everyone*. We are the late arrivals to the wedding feast. But our invitation is *not* a right or an entitlement; it's sheer *grace*. Yes, we are welcome to participate in the joyous celebration, but we come on the King's terms! Matthew warns of the dire consequences of accepting the invitation and doing nothing except showing up. Incidentally, the evocative phrase "weeping and gnashing of teeth" means

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<sup>18</sup> See Rom 13:12 – 14; Gal 3:27; Eph 6:11; Col 3:12; Rev 3:4; 6:11; 19:8.

<sup>19</sup> Corresponding to the good "fruits" in the imagery of the preceding parable; Matt 21:43.

<sup>20</sup> See also Matt 5:20; 7:21–23.

<sup>21</sup> This "living out" aspect is fleshed out in the Sermon on the Mount, Matt 5-7.

<sup>22</sup> The bulk of that paragraph's text is quoted from N. T. Wright's "Matthew For Everyone" commentary.

“mourning and anguished despair,” an appropriate response at a *funeral*, rather than a *wedding*! So Matthew makes it clear that while unfaithful Israel is condemned, those late arrivals – including us - should not be smug! But be reassured, God is the only one capable of balancing justice and mercy at the last judgement.<sup>23</sup>

So what are we to do?

Matthew, by implication, is challenging *his readers* – including you and me. Are we *too* busy doing the normal things of life, which are good and wholesome in themselves, but - as a consequence - are *ignoring* God? Or do we like the idea of being *loved* by God, but don't want to *live* as God's people? If so, we are in danger of being unworthy recipients of God's invitation. We need to heed Matthew's warning and honor the king. To refuse to do so is to scorn God's love and cheapen grace. It is to assert our own autonomy, rather than to recognize the authority of Jesus, the Son of God.

Second, know that Matthew's message is really an announcement of *good news* – it's an invitation to God's joyous party. Those who come wearing the right clothes have *absolutely nothing to fear*! This is *not* a call to be perfect; we are human after all! But we *are* to be actively pursuing what God desires of us, empowered by his Spirit. To be part of God's kingdom means us wanting and working to become more like Jesus. Paul puts it this way: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”<sup>24</sup> Those characteristics precisely reflect *God's* nature and are the right wedding clothes to wear.

So let us receive God's generous invitation and respond appropriately! Amen.

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<sup>23</sup> Matt 22:14 says: “For many are called, but few are chosen.” These words should *not* be understood as a forecast of the proportion of those who are ‘saved’ from those who were ‘damned.’ Neither is its function to frighten Christians with the thought that the statistical odds are against them! Rather it is to encourage vigorous effort to live the Christian life. Many are “called” is the divine *invitation* to the banquet. Whether one is actually “chosen” – and *don't* read Calvin's predestination into the text here (!) - depends on manifesting authentic Christian faith in deeds of love and justice at the last judgment; see Matt 25:31-46. There is an important element of free will here; we are responsible for responding positively to God's invitation. On the other hand, the final judgment is in the hands of just and loving God.

<sup>24</sup> Gal 5:22-23.