

# WEEKLY SERMON

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## An Unlikely Guest List

*Matthew 22:1-14*

Over the summer I had my first experience of celebrating a friend's wedding via Facebook. As you can imagine, it was a very different experience to other weddings I've attended, not least the hours of preparation and travel being rendered unnecessary! However, whilst my preparations may have been hugely reduced, the thought and planning required by the bride and groom and their families, not to mention the clergy, went way beyond what they could have imagined when they first set the date.

In this parable, Jesus tells the story of a king who prepares a wedding banquet for his son. This was going to be an incredible, auspicious occasion, and invitations had been sent out far and wide, long in advance, to distinguished guests giving them time to prepare for the beautiful feast. However, for every invitation received an excuse was found to decline, with some recipients even forcibly and violently rejecting the messengers. It's no wonder that the king is furious, they've insulted both him and his son, in their refusal to attend.

Undeterred, the king instructs his servants to find anyone and everyone who might come – good and bad, those that would not normally in their wildest dreams make this kind of guest list. Yet here they are, invited to come to the feast, and be clothed by the king in beautiful robes fit for the occasion. The final invitation that fills the banquet table is inclusive in the extreme – Jesus' parable embodying the hospitality and inclusiveness of the kingdom that he proclaimed.

This story of radical hospitality takes a sharp turn though, when someone turns up to the banquet without having dressed in the appropriate attire. I don't think this was really about his clothes, but actually something deeper about how he presented himself in the moment, thinking that he had no need of the king's gift or wedding clothes.

In our culture we spend so much time defining who is 'worthy' and who is not. We have our spoken and unspoken criteria and standards that need to be met in order to be considered amongst the good and the great – and it's all focused on us, and what we have, and what we can bring to the table. Yet here, in this parable, Jesus turns that on its head. The way of the kingdom of God is so different - those that in human terms, were considered worthy missed out, whilst the unworthy found themselves as recipients of gift upon gift and grace upon grace. You see for God, the criteria isn't about the worthiness of the individual, it's about their ability to recognise the urgency of the invitation, the one who issues it, and the will to respond.

Jesus spoke this parable as a warning to the religious rulers and people of the day, so that they might understand just how much God wanted them to share in the joy of the kingdom of God, and their need to respond to his invitation. We too are recipients of his invitation. The last book of the Bible ends with an invitation to the wedding celebration of Jesus, the Lamb of God who died for us, and now reigns as Kings of kings and Lord of lords – 'The Spirit and the bride say 'come' (Revelation 22:17). How will we respond? Will we refuse and decline the invitation? Will we accept but refuse to acknowledge our need of God's gift and grace? Or will we, like the unusual guest list of the parable, respond with joy and love?

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