

11.3.2019 Trinity 20 (Matthew 22:1-14)

In his book *The Furious Longing of God*, Brennan Manning shares this urban legend about the professional golfer Arnold Palmer. He writes that years ago, Palmer was invited to play a series of exhibition matches in Saudi Arabia. The king of the country was so impressed with the golfer that he offered to give him a gift, but Palmer declined, not realizing that gift giving is central to Saudi hospitality. The king was extremely displeased, so Palmer reconsidered, saying, "Well, how about a golf club? A golf club would be a wonderful memento of my visit here." The king was delighted, and the following day a messenger delivered to Palmer's hotel the title to a golf club, complete with 36 holes, trees, lakes, and buildings. The moral of the story is clear: In the presence of the king, there are no small gifts.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus shares a parable that provides a vivid illustration of the overwhelming generosity of the King of kings as He describes the provision that God has made for our Salvation. Our Lord begins this parable by telling us that this is what the kingdom of heaven is like. He begins by stating that what He is providing in this story to finite, sinful man is a vivid picture of God's eternal kingdom. Jesus said, "*The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son, and sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come. Again, he sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come unto the marriage. But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise: And the remnant took his servants, and entreated them spitefully, and slew them*" (Matthew 22:2-6).

As Jesus began to tell this story, the Jews who were present that day would have understood that they were the ones who were invited to the wedding, and *would not come*, because like a king who prepared a great wedding feast and sent his servants to tell the guests that everything was ready, God sent the Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist, even Christ Himself to call His chosen people to His wedding feast, but they *would not come*. The people of Israel ignored God's gracious invitation, instead choosing to go their own way, some to their farms, others to their business, and still others chose to

harm and even kill the servants of God. Jesus reminded the people of Israel of their history, and then made a very clear prophecy about the coming destruction of Jerusalem when He spoke of the king sending forth His armies to destroy those murderers and to burn up their city (Matthew 22:7).

From a historical perspective, the beginning of this parable describes the history of Israel and foretells of the coming destruction of the Temple and the devastation of the Jewish church and nation, and in their history we learn an important lesson. We learn that whoever you are, and wherever you are, responding to God and His gracious invitation is not something that we can be careless about. God has extended His invitation to every man, woman, and child through the Cross of Christ. He has manifested His infinite, sacrificial love for the world in the most costly, painful way. When you consider the facts, it's easy to see that a proper response to His invitation, a faithful response to His greatest expression of love, requires our constant attention and complete devotion.

Jesus continues the parable by telling us that the king said to his servants, *“The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy. Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage. So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good: and the wedding was furnished with guests”* (Matthew 22:8-10). After those who were invited to the wedding so callously and carelessly refused such a gracious invitation, the King sent His servants out into the streets with instructions to invite everyone to the marriage. His servants would fill the wedding hall with the homeless and the poor, the dirty and the downtrodden, the overlooked and the unworthy. Take just a minute to consider the last homeless person you saw on the street and tell me how surprised do you think they would be to receive an invitation to a royal wedding, or more accurately, considering our own faults and failures, how surprised should we be to receive this invitation, for we are those guests. Guests who did nothing to earn, and who do not deserve such overwhelming generosity. Guests who are called and chosen by the King of kings to join in the wedding feast only because of the grace and mercy of Almighty God. This fact brings to mind a line from the sermon hymn, “In my hand no price I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.”

Now, if we were making plans to attend a wedding, there's a good chance that we could find something in our closet suitable for the occasion, but Jesus lived in a society where many people had only the clothes on their back, and so it was customary for those who were invited to a wedding to be provided with a wedding garment. The clothing provided was evidence of the wealth and magnificence of the founder of the feast, and it ensured that everyone was clothed in a manner worthy of such a solemn and magnificent occasion. In this particular story, the royal wedding garments were of the utmost importance, for as you know the king had sent his servants out into the streets with instructions to invite everyone to the marriage. We can be certain that none of these people could have provided themselves with the proper attire. Every last one of them would have relied completely on the king to clothe them, and he did. Every guest was given the gift of a wedding garment, but Jesus tells us that *"when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment: And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen"* (Matthew 22:11-14).

The king so graciously furnished each guest with the clothing necessary for the occasion, but when he came in, he saw a man who had arrogantly rejected his gift. This man, like everyone else, heard the call to come to the marriage and entered the wedding hall, but apparently he believed that what the king had freely provided for him was insignificant, unimportant, and unnecessary. This man seems to have his own subjective idea of what's right or wrong when standing in the presence of the king, and insists on doing things his way instead of the king's way.

In this man we see that as persons made in the image and likeness of God, we are given the freedom to go our own way, for the King of kings rules not with an iron fist, but with love. We know that *"God is love"* (1 John 4:8), and love cannot be forced on anyone. God forces no one to accept the free gift that He so graciously offers. He forces no one to clothe themselves in the righteousness of Christ, to cover themselves in the precious Blood of His Son, or to sanctify themselves by His grace through the indwelling of the

Holy Spirit. We are free to carelessly go our own way, to arrogantly pick and choose what we want to believe from Holy Scripture, to work it all out ourselves; but as we heard through language that speaks of being bound hand and foot and cast into outer darkness, this parable holds a dire warning for people who think that they can stand in the presence of God relying on their merit, clothed in their own good works. In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis commented on this type of thinking when he wrote: “Some people talk as if meeting the gaze of absolute goodness would be fun. They need to think again. They are still only playing with religion. Goodness is either the great safety or the great danger - according to the way you react to it. And we have reacted the wrong way.”

A parable is a fictitious story that is meant to communicate Divine Truth, and as this parable concludes, the Divine Truth that our Lord intends to communicate becomes perfectly clear. The Truth He reveals, to those who have ears to hear, is that we cannot be careless or negligent in our response to the grace, mercy, and overwhelming generosity of God in the provision that He has made for our Salvation. God sent His prophets, His servants, and even His Son to offer His personally and painfully written invitation to the world, declaring, “*All things are ready: come unto the marriage,*” come to Salvation and everlasting life, for the sacrifice of My only-begotten Son was not only sufficient for all, it was intended for all (1 Timothy 2:4, 4:10; John 1:29, 3:16, 4:42; 1 John 2:2, 4:14), the homeless and the poor, the dirty and the downtrodden, the overlooked and the unworthy. Through this story our Lord assures us that all are welcome, everyone is invited.

Our Lord and God has done for the world what the world could not do for itself. Now with His work finished, our part is simply, by His grace, to respond to His everlasting love. So, let us redeem the time He has given us, remembering that in the presence of the King there are no small gifts. The Giver of “*every good gift and every perfect gift*” (James 1:17) has no intention of giving you a club, His desire is to give you the whole course.