

10.22.2023 Trinity 20 (St. Matthew 22:1-14)

One of the most common recurring dreams that many people experience are those terrifying nightmares about being unprepared. A recent survey reported that dreaming about being unprepared for an important test or major event was very common in the U.S., and that this particular type of nightmare often focuses on terrifying experiences like facing a final exam for a course that you've forgotten you were taking and for which you have never attended a single class, or forgetting the location of the classroom on the day of the test, perhaps never knowing it to begin with, or being prevented from reaching the classroom - at times by actual physical obstacles. In other cases, the subject of this type of nightmare doesn't center on education, but on some other major life event for which the person is completely unprepared, like their own wedding.

The thought of being caught unprepared for an important event in this life is so terrifying that even when such things are safely part of our past, many people, including myself, are still so horrified by the idea that it causes them to have these recurring nightmares. Now, whether you've experienced such nightmares or not, we can all certainly relate to how terrible it feels to be caught unprepared, and this theme, the importance of readiness, not only in this life, but also in our preparation for the life to come, is the focus of our Collect, Epistle, and Gospel lesson this morning.

In the Collect we prayed: "Almighty God... keep us... from all things that may hurt us; that we, being ready both in body and soul, may cheerfully accomplish those things which thou commands..." The intention of our prayer this morning, which is based on the Scriptures we read today, is that God our Father would keep us, or deliver us, from those things that would hinder our ability to prepare, and then cheerfully accomplish, that which He commands. To be ready, both in body and soul, to cheerfully accomplish God's will for our lives is a high call, especially in our time and culture, and one that we certainly cannot begin to answer in our own power. We require Divine assistance. We need God's grace. We ask: Lord, hear our prayer.

In our Epistle this morning, St. Paul exhorted us to "*walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil*"

(Ephesians 5:15-16). In other words, walk carefully, not foolishly. Don't act like the foolish maidens who let their lamps burn out and were unprepared when the bridegroom arrived for the wedding feast. Instead, redeem the time God has given you. Seize it. Take hold of every moment and rescue it from those things that tempt us to waste what precious time we've been given. Use this day, and every day, to carefully watch and prepare, *"for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming"* (Matthew 25:1-13).

In the Gospel we read today, Jesus told a parable about the kingdom of heaven being *"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"* (Matthew 22:2-4).

*All things are ready*, are we? As we prayed in the Collect, are we ready both in body and soul to cheerfully accomplish that which God commands? As St. Paul exhorts us in the Epistle, are we ready to rescue every moment from those things that would tempt us to waste what precious time we've been given? As we read in the Gospel, are we ready, or are we like those who disregarded the invitation *"and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise."* Are we ready, or are we like others who took the king's servants *"and entreated them spitefully, and slew them."* Are we ready, or are we like the man who heard the call and came to the marriage, but refused to clothe himself in a wedding garment?

The importance of readiness, not only in this life, but also in our preparation for the life to come, is our focus this morning, and the parable we read in the Gospel is a story Jesus told that paints a vivid picture of those who were not ready, those who showed callous indifference toward the gracious invitation of a king. It's a truly shocking picture, illustrated by people who not only ignore their king's invitation, but kill his servants, and the intent of this unthinkable illustration is to wake up a sleeping world. Jesus told this story in the first century to a people blind to His coming, and it's been repeated to this day that we may see our own indifference toward the love of God, and the

gracious invitation of the King of Kings. By the grace of God, may the imagery in this parable startle us, may it keep us from the nightmare of finding ourselves unprepared for the Gospel feast that God has made ready for His people.

Every example in this story is an opportunity to consider the question: Are we ready?, but the final example in this parable is perhaps the most shocking and troubling. The parable concludes with Jesus telling us that *“when the king came in to see the guests, he saw a man there who did not have on a wedding garment. So he said to him, Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen”*(Matthew 22:11-14).

Here we have a man who didn't ignore the king's invitation, or kill his servants. This is a man who heard the call and came to the wedding, yet showed his own callous indifference to the most gracious invitation by refusing to clothe himself in a wedding garment. When the king arrived to find this man wearing the old clothes of everyday life, he told the servants to cast him out, and in this final example we recognize an important Gospel lesson. The loving invitation of God, through the Gospel of our Savior Christ, is graciously presented to all people. Scripture tells us that God our Savior *“desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”* (1 Timothy 2:3-4), that *“God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son...”* (John 3:16), that Jesus Christ is *“the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world”* (1 John 2:2), and that the King sent his servants *“out into the highways,”* and they *“gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good”* (Matthew 22:10). All kinds of people are invited, but all kinds of people, on their own, apart from Christ, are not worthy to appear at such a magnificent, heavenly feast.

We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under His Table, therefore, the King, in the greatest, most excruciatingly painful example of sacrificial generosity, through the Cross of Christ, freely provides a wedding garment so that even the lowest and the worst may come to His feast without delay, and the garment He provides for *the whole world* is the righteousness

of His Son. Holy Scripture tells us to “*clothe yourselves in the Lord Jesus Christ*” (Romans 13:14), for as we pray in the prayer of Humble Access, our “sinful bodies” are “made clean by His body,” and our souls are “washed through His most precious blood,” to the end that “we may evermore dwell in Him, and He in us.”

It is the desire of God our King to clothe us in the righteousness of His Son. His gracious invitation through the Gospel of our Lord is to come without delay, come as you are, but don't remain as you are. Don't be like the man who heard the call and came to the feast, but was cast out because he chose to remain in the shabby old clothes of everyday life. Instead come as you are, but don't remain as you are. Come as Peter the rough fisherman, and become St. Peter the fisher of men. Come as Mary Magdalene, who was possessed by seven devils, and become Mary Magdalene, Apostle to the Apostles, the first person to see and to commune with our Risen Lord. Come as Saul of Tarsus, murdering persecutor of the Church, and become St. Paul the Apostle - missionary, evangelist, and inspired author of Holy Scripture.

*All things are ready*, and our God and King who made all things ready, intends to make us ready as well, “both in body and soul.” His Divine love graciously calls us just as we are, both *bad and good*, then through His Son, the Father provides for us the clothing of “*righteousness and true holiness*” (Ephesians 4:24) to the end that we may enter in to all that He has prepared for us. *All things are ready*, our King has, at infinite cost through the Cross of Christ, prepared all things necessary for our Salvation, and therefore our part is to simply respond to His gracious invitation, to clothe ourselves in Christ, to cheerfully accomplish His will, and in joy and gladness with the angels and saints, to “*come to the marriage*” of heaven and earth.