

Come to the Wedding

KATHLEEN RUSHTON grapples with the Parable of the Wedding Feast in Matthew 22:1-14 comparing the willingness of guests called to the banquet table.

“**T**o go in with all guns blazing,” “if you do that I’ll murder you,” “to nuke the opposition” – these phrases are so much part of daily speech that their violent literal meanings are lost in unexamined exaggeration. In the everyday speech of everyday speakers, we don’t notice the violence of these dead metaphors, but when someone in a position of power threatens to unleash “fire and fury like the world has never seen” – as Donald Trump did recently – our collective ears prick up. In the troubling parable of the wedding feast (Mt 22:1-14), the violent language and actions of the king who is suggestive of God are embedded in a context, its rhetoric and power relationships.

Ancient Context of Destruction

The absurdly exaggerated response to destroy those murderers and

burn their city prompts readers to remember that Matthew wrote most likely in Antioch about 50 years after Jesus’ crucifixion, and about a decade after the destruction of Jerusalem. Both events were perpetrated by the military force of the Roman Empire. It is hard to imagine the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple, the religious, political and economic centre. Priestly leadership could no longer function. In this void, Matthew’s community, too, was finding its way within the leadership struggles of Judaism from which emerged rabbinic Judaism and Christianity. Was Wisdom *Sophia*, for example, now found in the Torah or in Jesus?

Gospel Context

So Matthew’s story of Jesus is shaped by the struggles of that time. In his early ministry in Galilee, Jesus is presented as interpreter of the Torah, as healer and reconciler. He gathers disciples. Ordinary folk come to believe in him. However, for many especially the religious leaders, Jesus is not the Messiah they were expecting. Conflict increases. Jesus

takes a new direction and journeys to Jerusalem. As he enters the holy city, the crowds acclaim: “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth” (Mt 21:11). Jesus then enters and cleanses the Temple.

It could be that Matthew is projecting the ever-watching religious leaders of the unsettled 80s CE back into Jesus’ lifetime, questioning his authority. Certainly in the two world-turning-upside-down parables of the two sons and wicked tenants, “they realised he was speaking about them”. They seek to arrest him but are afraid of the crowds who regarded him as a prophet. Tension rises. Jesus does not back off. He tells a third parable, the wedding feast, which is laced with strange, absurd details which astonish, shock and tease. What does he mean? Then soon after, in a lengthy 35 verse denunciation,

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(Revised Common Lectionary)

Jesus repeats six times: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” Then, he laments over Jerusalem (Mt 23:37-39). This lament helps to place our parable in context.

Invited but Unwilling

In antiquity, there were two stages of invitations to a feast. A request was sent out for guests to attend. Then a second request went out when the banquet was ready. In

Matthew, both times the king “sent his slaves”, evoking Wisdom sending her messengers (Proverbs 9:3). The same word (*kaleo*) is repeated: they are literally “to call those having been called” (Mt 22:3).

This is translated usually as “who have been invited.” While “call” may suggest the authority of the king, in Matthew’s Gospel, God’s calling of Jesus is for God’s purposes (Mt 1:21, 23; 2:15; 4:21; 5:9; 21:13).

Usual translations of “they would (*thelo*) not come” (Mt 22:3) obscure a word used, also, when Jesus laments over Jerusalem, the city which symbolises Israel: “How often have I desired (*thelo*) to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not desiring (*thelo*)!” (Mt. 23:37-39). The verb *thelo* meaning “to will”, “to be willing”, or “to desire” is translated often as “want”.

How helpful today is “want” when it is linked to acquiring more, wanting one’s way? “Desire” goes deeper. In the Gospels, this word is found in three ways: healing those who desire to be healed; in Jesus’ conditions of discipleship; and in parables when Jesus seeks to win people to specific patterns of behaviour. By giving attention to “call” and “desire”, the parable of the wedding feast can be understood to be about the choice of the called to be desiring (or not desiring) to respond.

Feasting at God’s Table

The king’s hosting a wedding feast for his son suggests God giving a feast for Jesus who is known as God’s son. A wedding banquet evokes biblical traditions. Marriage is found in the prophets as an image for God’s covenant relationship with God’s people (Hosea 1-3). Feasting suggests participation in God’s purposes. God provides food for the people in the

Exodus. God will make “for all peoples a feast of rich food” (Is 25:6). The image of God as “king” is meshed with Wisdom *Sophia* who, in Proverbs 9:2-5, “has slaughtered her animals, mixed her wine ... set her table ... sent out her servant-girls, she calls ... Come, eat my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed.”

The feast alerts the reader to food as the gift of earth

and the work of human hands. “Give us this day our daily bread” (Mt 6:11) is an example of food as a gift from God symbolising God’s justice and giving of adequate resources for all. Jesus eats with the unlikely and outcasts. Meals provoke conflict and divisions. Religious leaders object to the company, time, observance and place of Jesus’ meals. Food (yeast) is used to warn disciples about the teaching of some religious leaders.

Invited and Willing

Those invited to a king’s feast would have been the well-to-do elites as eating together assumed a common social class. No-one crossed those boundaries. Between 5-10 per cent of this population lived in the centre of cities separated by internal city walls and gates. From there, they controlled the economic, political and religious life. These people would not refuse to attend a king’s banquet. They needed to be seen there, to curry favour. But, astonishingly, the parable says that some of those invited are indifferent. Some accept. Some even become violent. To offer lame excuses and refuse is unimaginable, let alone to

mistreat and kill the king’s slaves.

Now the king sends his slaves out “into main streets” and “into streets”, words better translated as “public squares” where those who live outside the city could be found. They call all the ordinary people, the outcasts, beggars and all not permitted to live within the city walls.

The end of the parable functions as a warning to all Christians (Mt 22:14). After the time of call is the time to put on our “garments”, as St. Paul exhorts: “For all of you who are baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” Being clothed with Christ includes being clothed with the works of mercy (Mt 25:31-46) including an eighth work of “care for our common home”. At our banquet, the Eucharist, we must include the marginalised and ask ourselves: Who is missing? 

Painting: *Banquet Still Life* by Abraham van Beyerem c1620-1690. Inset: Mosaic on the altar of Church of Dominus Fleuit (Jesus has wept) on Mount of Olives.



Marralomedas Charitable Trust Community Leader

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