

The Parable of the Great Banquet

Explaining the Gospel Reading

Luke 14:16-24; Matthew 22:14 (Eleventh Sunday of Luke)



While the Parable in the Gospel of Luke and Matthew follow the same basic plot about guests who turn down the invitation to a banquet, a few details in St. Matthew's version call for closer attention. The banquet is given by a king to celebrate the wedding of his son (Matthew 22:2). As in the parable of the Vineyard, the unwilling guests abused and even killed the servants sent to invite them. Again, as in the parable of the vineyard, the king responds angrily; he "...killed those murderers and burned their city" (Matthew 22:6-7). In place of these ungrateful guests, the host in both versions sends servants out to bring in whomever they can find. Typically, St. Luke (14:21) specifies "the poor and maimed and blind and lame." Only Luke (14:23-24) reports a second attempt to fill the banquet hall: "Go out to the highways and byways and compel people to come in (the violent take it by force), that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet."

In St. Matthew's version (22:11-14), the parable concludes on a particularly puzzling note. "When the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment; and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. And the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.'" According to Matthew, Jesus sums up the moral of this parable, "For many are called, but few are chosen." Ancient and modern interpreters alike have puzzled over just what a "wedding garment" might be and why someone brought off the street into a banquet should have one. A rabbinic text suggests that nothing more than a clean garment is meant. This suggests a moral interpretation, which is how St. John Chrysostom, St. Gregory the Great and St. Augustine understand the parable. The guests are all those who are invited into the Church by the preaching of the Gospel. The invitation is unearned and, in baptism, each person receives a spotless wedding garment. It is up to the individual, however, to cooperate with God's grace and keep that garment clean. The arrival of the king to see the guests is a warning about the final judgment. In its original telling, the parable may have dramatized the expansion of God's plan of salvation to include Gentiles (Romans 11:12).

The image of the wedding garment recurs in the liturgies of Great and Holy Week. For several days we sing at Matins: "I see your bridal chamber all adorned, O my Savior; and I have no wedding garment that I may enter therein. Brighten the robe of my soul, O Giver of Life, and save me." This hymn leaves open the possibility that I am meant to be more than a wedding guest; that, if I am found ready, the union with God symbolized by the wedding could be my own.

In the depicted icon the banquet scene is flanked by views of the invited guests who refuse to come because of buying oxen (upper left), a new field (upper right) or because of a recent marriage (lower right). The scene in the lower left shows a servant inviting a lame man to come in their place.