

It was the middle of Holy Week when Jesus told this parable that we have in our Gospel reading for today. And it was the third of three parables that he told in his final confrontation with the Jews. The first parable was of two sons, one who said that he was going to work but then didn't, and another who said that he would not work but then did. The second parable was a parable about a vineyard filled with tenants, tenants who killed all the servants of the master that he sent to them to get its fruits. And the third parable, our parable for today, is about a wedding feast and that those who were first invited were not worthy. And as Matthew says in chapter 21, just before our reading: "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them." Jesus was very pointedly telling them that they were going to be judged. He spoke these parables against them. But even though they were against them, Christians, we should still pay attention. We should still carefully listen, because their failure is an example for us. It shows us what we should not do. And through this parable today, we learn what it means to truly be a part of the kingdom of God.

So Jesus begins in verse 2 of our reading: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come." The king in this parable is like God the Father. The son is like Jesus himself. And the wedding feast is like a couple of things. First of all, it is like God first coming to the Jews to proclaim that the kingdom had come among them. When Jesus first came down to earth, he proclaimed that the kingdom of God had come for Israel. He was the fulfillment of the promises of David. But the wedding feast also refers to the great wedding feast of the Lamb, the Last Day when the kingdom of God will be finally established. God invites all of us to participate in that feast. He wants us all to be there. Keeping both those things in mind will help us to understand the point of this parable.

The servants in this parable are like the prophets of God, those that God sent to prepare the way for Christ. Men like Isaiah or Jeremiah or Ezekiel or especially John the Baptist. They were sent to call the Jews to receive their king. They were sent to prepare the way for the Lord. Those who are invited in this parable are like the Jews, those who first received the promises. Because God first made the promises of Abraham to them. God first promised the kingdom to them. And by all rights, they should have accepted. They should have received Jesus when he came. But they did not come. They did not listen. As John says in his Gospel, Jesus came to his own, but his own did not receive him. They did not want to receive Jesus as their king.

Now, why is that? Why would they not want to receive Jesus? Couldn't they see that he was the promised one? Couldn't they see that he was the Son of David? Well, for many reasons, really, but above all because they wanted to be righteous in themselves. They wanted to be right with God based on what they had done, on the basis of their own works. Paul makes this clear in Romans 9, when he says: "They did not pursue it," that is, righteousness, "by faith, but as if it were based on works." And if we try to get right with God based on our works, Christians, if we try to be righteous based on our own actions, then we don't have any use for Jesus. And likewise, if we just don't care, if we don't care if we're right with God or not, we aren't going to care about Jesus either. So the Jews did not come, because they did not want to come. They did not care about the kingdom of God.

Now, the king, by all rights, should have punished them right then and there. It's a grave insult to just ignore the king. It's a very grave insult to just turn away his messengers. He would've been

perfectly just to destroy them in that moment. But he does something remarkable here! Jesus says in verse 4: "Again he sent other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, "See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.'" Do we not see here, Christians, something of the mercy of God? Even though his people turned away from him, even though they didn't want anything to do with him, he kept coming back again and again. Because God is gracious. God is steadfast, abounding in steadfast love. And he sent to them many prophets, many prophets of which we don't even know their names, all of them calling for God's people to come back to him, to repent of their sins and live. Just as God calls to us today to turn away from our sins and to find life in him. Everything is ready, he says. Come to the wedding feast!

But they still did not listen. They did not want to listen. And yes, it is true, God is merciful. God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. That's absolutely true! But it's not because he has to be, Christians. If God had to be merciful, if God had to show us mercy, it would not be mercy. Rather, God shows us mercy because he wants to. He wants to forgive us. He wants to make us his own again. He wants to bring us back. But if we keep turning away from him, if we keep rejecting that mercy, God must finally do what is right. Because God is just, Christians. Everything that he does is good and right and holy. And he must finally deal with the problem of sin. That's why Jesus says, verse 7 of our reading: "The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city."

This is exactly what had happened to the Jews, Christians. They rejected the Lord. They crucified the Lord of glory, Jesus Christ, when they nailed him to the cross. They didn't want anything to do with God. They kept turning away. And yet even then, God still sent to them the apostles and the evangelists, preaching to them the Gospel, calling them to repent even of that sin and to live. He would've forgiven them even that. But many still rejected it. Many turned away from him. Many even persecuted the Church. And so God's patience finally ran out, and in 70 A.D. he brought judgment down upon the city of Jerusalem. By the hand of the Romans, God burned the city and scattered the Jews among the nations, where they are even to this day. And we learn from this, Christians, that we must not presume on the mercy of God. We must not assume anything of God, because we don't deserve anything on our own!

But the feast is still ready. God has prepared his feast, and he will have it filled with guests. So the king sends out a new order, verse 9 of our reading: "Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find." God is now calling a new people to himself. He is calling new nations to be part of his Church. He is creating out of the nations the true Israel of God. This was always his plan. He always intended to save the world through Christ. But now the nations come into the kingdom first. They are the first-fruits of the Church. And that is us, Christians. We have been gathered in. We are those brought in from the highways and the hedges. God called us to faith in Jesus Christ through the preaching of his Word. The invitation was not ours first. The promises that God made to Abraham and to David were not ours first. But they have become ours through faith. And the wedding hall is now filled. The kingdom has come into the world. And through the undeserved mercy of God, we now have a place at his table. We are now part of the wedding feast of the Lamb in his kingdom which will never come to an end!

But we must not be proud about this, Christians. We must not assume that we somehow deserve to be there. That somehow we deserve it and the Jews didn't. And in the parable, we see this

when Jesus talks about the king finding a man in his wedding feast who has no wedding garment. This man hadn't bothered to clean up at all. He just came to the feast, probably after work. Didn't even bother to wash himself, didn't even bother to change his clothes. The feast was nothing special to him. He simply didn't care. And so the king had him cast out, because no one deserves a place at the table.

And that wedding garment, Christians, is like Christ himself, because we put on his righteousness the way that we put on our clothes. Paul even says, Galatians chapter 3: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." And just like clothes cover us, but aren't actually part of us, so the righteousness that comes from God is not our own. We are covered in it. We are at the table because of Jesus. But we should ask ourselves: do we put on Christ every day? Do we wear him every day? Or is Jesus just our Sunday best, the kind of thing that we'll leave behind today when we get to Monday morning? It is a danger that we must avoid. We must not presume on the mercy of God!

But when we confess our sins, Christians, we will find his mercy. We will find his forgiveness. Because Jesus knows our weakness, Christians. He knows that we often stumble and fall. So when we confess our sins, he will make us new. He will bring us again to the table. He will give us a place at the feast. Not because we deserve--because we don't--but because he himself brings us there. And likewise, we will enter into the glories of heaven through the undeserved mercies of God.

So Christians, listen to his voice today. Listen to his invitation. Turn from your sins and come to the feast! Don't delay! Don't turn away! Confess those sins and come to the Lord today. Because the feast is ready. All has been prepared. Call on the name of Jesus Christ and be saved!

Let us pray. Lord God, our loving Father, who calls to us through the Holy Spirit to turn from our wicked ways and live, forgive us our sins and turn us toward you, so that we may enter into the wedding feast of the Lamb in his kingdom, which has no end; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who gave himself for us and whose righteousness is now our own, and through whom you have promised to hear us. Amen.