

Holy Week 2021 Tuesday

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Disruption and scripture: Matthew 22.1-14

Perspective is central to our interpretation of events around us. I do not claim that this is a great insight on my part. In fact, it's trite. But for all that it is, strangely, something which is routinely forgotten.

Pick up any remotely mainstream commentary on the parable of the wedding feast, and you will hear that the tale sketches our refusal to respond to the graceful offer of salvation. The king is God the Father, and there are no prizes for working out that the son, for whom the wedding feast is prepared, represents Jesus Christ. Jesus having come into the world, the feast which the king has prepared stands for our opportunity to enter into communion with God via his incarnate son. The king offers nothing but free grace: a place at the banquet, food and wine, and joyful celebration. Who in their right mind would refuse such an offer?

Yet the hard hearted servants encountered by the king's messengers turn their back. Worse, they mock and kill the messengers sent to invite them. No wonder the king was angry. Their rejection was the rejection of those who refuse to hear the good news: their evisceration in what follows is reasonable, deserved even. But, grace upon grace, the king offers his hospitality again, this time even more widely and freely than before. The A List invitees having disgraced themselves, the king rejects the notion of preferential guests entirely. Anyone can come to the feast: hoi polloi, "both good and bad", those wandering the streets as they go about their normal business are bidden to the king's table to share his joy and his munificence.

But there's a catch. Though the king is gracious, he expects those to whom he offers his hospitality to give something back. With such a generous king in charge of the city, prone to showering favour on his people at next to no notice, it is only natural that the citizens should go about ready for the feast, clothed properly, able to fit in at the party. The guest who arrives at the feast without his wedding garment has only himself to blame: his speechlessness is a sign of the regret of the unworthy, of someone who ought to have known better. No

one likes an ungrateful guest. The outer darkness – with its ostracization, social death and irrelevance – is where such people rightly belong. St Augustine thought that the wedding garment which the guest lacked was love. And St Paul famously reminded us that, whatever gifts we possess, if we possess them without love, we are nothing.

In a book called *Reading the Bible with the Damned*, the American theologian Bob Ekblad described his experiences of digesting scripture with undocumented migrants, gang members and inmates of all flavours in a rough jail in Washington state. During those encounters Ekblad became aware of a dangerous complacency in the way many people interpret the bible, and thus shape their perception of and relationship to God.

Their lives at a low ebb (to put it mildly), for the prisoners and migrants – the damned – the bible was not a source of reassurance or an aid to calm self-examination, but confirmation of their subjugation. And it was that because they brought to it their preconceptions that society was inevitably ordered in a way which had no place for them. God was an impossibly demanding celestial sovereign, a souped-up version of the police and judges who had already, in their own lives, sentenced them to the furthest margins of society. The norms of obedience and exemplarism, standards by which they were keenly aware that they had already failed, were, they thought, to be found writ large and over an eternal time frame in the pages of the bible.

As Ekblad's comfortable top-down perspective of scripture was challenged by these darker interpretations, he resolved to be disruptive. He encouraged the damned to read the stories by looking for themselves in them. Soon the men were identifying with the tax collectors and the sinners, the unclean and the despised, those held in contempt by the respectable pillars of society. It took the assurance of Ekblad, pointing out that it was in the very midst of these communities that Jesus was to be found, and not in the centres of civil and religious power, before the prisoners could begin to see liberating narratives in the text: stories which subverted the very notion of the margins by having Jesus set up his kingdom there. Suddenly scripture was a light shone on their experience with the scandalous implication that they weren't the problem, but in fact part of the solution. Their perspective changed, as did that of Ekblad, and that made all the difference.

I dare say most of us here read the parable of the wedding feast in a top down way, accepting what appears to be its implicit social order, because to do so involves making assumptions about the way the world works which have suited us well in our own lives. A powerful sovereign is a good thing atop a stable civil structure. The enforcement of laws against those who would subvert them protects us and our property. Codified systems of good manners (like those concerning dress) are helpful tools as we navigate our way up the greasy pole of prosperity, reputation and advancement.

What if we indulge in some scriptural disruption of our own? What if we approach the parable through the other end of the telescope, from the bottom up – from the point of view not of the righteous sovereign but the anonymous man cast into outer darkness? One doesn't have to press very hard to see something really very sinister emerge.

For this man, the wedding feast is no celebration. It is another day of obligation. To us, today, a wedding is a time of joy and celebration. But a royal wedding in ancient times was pre-eminently about reinforcing power and entrenching dominance. The king here “makes” the marriage for his son, no doubt choosing the bride, and fixing the terms and the shape of the celebrations. The proud, loving and altruistic father of our instinctive reading becomes a scheming autocrat, anxious about dynastic (and essentially self-) preservation. The meal which he offers is not for the enjoyment of the guests but for his own reflected glory. Note how the guests are not invited so much as summoned. Don't come because there'll be a warm welcome, or because I really want you here: come because I'm telling you to, just as I dictate every other aspect of how you live your subservient lives.

Those told to attend mock the king's servants. Now tyrants can cope with being feared and hated: it cements their domination. But one thing they cannot stand is being laughed at. Here we feel the king's authority slipping. And against that disintegration there is the wanton violence of the first round of intended guests, slaying the servants of the king. And not just killing them – these hired hands, miserable in their own way – but doing it with spite. This wedding day is dark. There is no joy: just fear, intimidation and blood.

But the king tries again: the desperate dictator facing the contemptuous, laughing crowd, clutches at straws in an attempt to salvage his power. Invite anyone! Go

even out onto the highways and take whoever is passing: any poor, lowly, subsistence level worker, busy trying to make enough to stay alive, will do. Whichever of these you find, bring them to me to serve as ornaments at my celebration of myself and my power. So the henchmen go out and the system of fear and repression fills the seats with bodies. The king comes in to receive his reward, to survey the plastic adulation of his people, but someone isn't playing his game.

The anonymous man sits before the king without his wedding garment, a conspicuous, scandalous reminder of the reality which the king won't accept - that these people have not come to celebrate but to conform. The reality that this wedding is no celebration of love: there's no love for this king. The reality that the king's generosity is not for others but is a means of glorifying himself. The reality that the value of other people is not the service they can render to the king but their own inherent worth.

The speechlessness of the man isn't a defeat but is the silence in which the penny finally, noisily, drops for the king. No longer can he triumph through the complacent enforcement of power. The rules have changed: someone now stands before him in silence and by and through that very act of peace, in the face of oppression, triumphs in a way which the king can never hope to do. This is a victorious silence and it defeats a king. In only a few chapters' time, silence will make another victorious return. An obscure carpenter, with no special clothing, will stand silently before the questions of a Roman governor when on trial for his life.

This silence of the man in the parable, just like the peace of Christ, can't be corralled. It can't be contained. It can't be subordinated to dynasties or a higher authority. The king tries to: he orders that the man is bound and cast into darkness, into a bin where the king can try to forget about him and his crazy ideas. But binding the man will not help the king. We recall how Jesus himself, before he is brought before Pilate, is bound. But those bonds will not contain him, and neither will the tomb.

The missing wedding garment of the parable is no longer a sign of shame and poverty, but a reminder of the willingness of Christ to break bread with anyone, tax collectors and sinners even, however they are dressed, at a meal where

(unlike at the wedding feast) people are present because they participate in a community based on love and not fear.

Suddenly the outer darkness doesn't seem so dark, and the wailing and gnashing of teeth belong to those left behind at the loveless parody of a feast.

We are called not to that meal, but to break bread at Christ's table.

Amen.