

Trinity 20

St Mary's, Barnes, 8 am

Matthew 22, 1-14

Today's Gospel arouses our indignation. Someone gives a wedding party and sends out invitations. Those invited refuse to come so he sends them out again. This time those invited not only refuse they beat up those who carry the invitation. In response the host destroys their dwellings and tells his servants to go out into the streets and round up anyone they can find to come. Then when they have come someone is noticed not wearing proper wedding attire, so he is expelled. What are we to make of it all? First, the importance of distinguishing parable from allegory. Jesus taught in parables-that is he made one challenging point related to his own ministry. The first Christians, however, in the light of events sometimes turned these parables into allegories in which each detail acts as a symbol for some hidden truth. The story as we have it in Matthew is an allegory, reflecting the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish leaders, the mission to the gentiles and the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 AD. The actual parable told by Jesus was something much simpler. The idea of the Kingdom of Heaven as a great party was a familiar image in the Judaism of the time. As you know at the heart of the message of Jesus was the announcement that this kingdom was now breaking into the world and he invited people to live in it under God's rule. He took this message to everyone, not just the pious. Indeed, he went out of his way to mix with those who were not respectable. It is easy to see how the early church could, in the light of what had actually happened turn this message into an allegory. To this allegory they attached another picture, the person at the feast found without their smart clothes. We don't know what the context and first meaning of this was- and people have given it different meanings down the ages, usually something like our wedding clothes being the act of repentance which lets us into the wedding feast.

I like the picture painted by Charles Williams. Charles Williams was a novelist and poet who with C.S. Lewis and Tolkien was one of the three inklings, the Oxford literary figures who wrote imaginative works suffused with their serious Christian faith. In a long poem Williams imagines looking down at this great wedding feast of the Kingdom in which everyone is resplendent in their wedding garments. And what are these wedding garments? They are nothing less than the admirable qualities which we can often find in other people, especially the people we criticize, if we look at them with the eyes of Christ, so as he writes

He saw along
The Great Hall and the Heavenly Stair
One blaze of glorious changes there.
Cloaks, brooches, decorations, swords,
Jewels - every virtue that affords
(By dispensation of the Throne)
Beauty to wearers not their own.
This guest his brother's courage wore
That, his wife's zeal, while, just before,
She in his steady patience shone;
There a young lover had put on
The fine integrity of sense
His mistress used; magnificence
A father borrowed of his son,
Who was not there ashamed to don
His father's wise economy.
No he or she was he or she
Merely: no single being dared,
Except the Angels of the Guard,
Come without other kind of dress
Than his poor life had to profess,
And yet those very robes were shown,
When from preserval as his own

Into another's glory given,
Bright ambiguities of heaven.

Within the body of Christ we are all bound up together. The qualities we admire in others become ours as well. More challengingly what we criticize others for may hide qualities we out to admire. No doubt the son criticised his father's wise economy as meanness as he criticised his son's sense of style as extravagance.

It is a poem that encourages us to look beyond our criticism of others to see in them some quality that might be worth emulating, for in the feast of the kingdom no he or she is he or she merely. Their qualities help to form our wedding dress.