

Today we consider God's invitation for all to take their place in his kingdom of justice, joy and love and we are asked to remember this week in our prayers those who are homeless and those who are prisoners.

One of the readings for today is from the prophet Isaiah and it speaks of the Lord's promise, provision and protection for his people. Let us pray using these words.

O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name;  
for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure.  
On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food,  
a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow,  
of well-matured wines strained clear.  
And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples,  
the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death for ever.  
Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,  
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.  
It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.  
This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Isaiah 25:1, 6-9

God thank you that you have shown yourself to be faithful in the provision for and protection of your people. We are sorry for the times when we would rather trust in our own strength than rely on you, and for the times when our thoughtless words and actions have brought sorrow to you, to others and to ourselves. We are thankful for Jesus' gracious words to those who turn to him in repentance, 'Your sins are forgiven'. Holy Spirit would you work in us so that we might live lives that are worthy of your name and that would draw others to you. In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen**

We continue in praise of our wonderful God in the words of the song 'I stand in awe'.

### Song

Who can know the mind of our creator? Who can speak of wonders yet unseen?  
Who can reach the height of understanding, To play the notes of wisdom's melody?

Who has weighed the dust of every mountain? Who has walked the mysteries of the deep?  
Who has laid the earth on its foundation, And who conducts the waves upon the sea?

*I stand in awe of you, I stand in awe of you,  
So glorious and true: I stand in awe, I stand in awe.*

You have seen the end from the beginning. You have been before the world began.  
You have reached to me within my darkness, And in the light of mercy now I see.

SoF 2143 Martyn Layzell © 2005 Thankyou Music

### Reading Matthew 22:1-14

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the

wedding banquet.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."

## Sermon

### INVITATION TO THE HEAVENLY BANQUET

My dear child (your name is written here)

God the Father has reserved a place for you at the wedding feast of his Son.

Date & Time to be confirmed - please be ready when called

Note: garments of righteousness are provided and MUST be worn

This is your personal invitation to the wedding banquet, to the kingdom of heaven, issued by God himself. Take hold of it firmly for now and we'll have a look at it more closely in a moment.

At the point where we hear the parable of the wedding banquet, Jesus' disputes with the Pharisees have continued to escalate – he knows he is on his way to the cross and paints a dramatic picture of what is to come for those who do not take his warnings seriously. The nation of Israel had long-since been invited to the wedding feast through the words of the prophets – the invitation coming from God the Father was that they might share true and joyful fellowship with the Son. Jesus is warning them (again!) that their early invitation will not guarantee their place, and he builds on what he said just before this, 'Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom' (Matt 21:43). Through Jesus' bold and colourful language, the Pharisees can be in no doubt that without a drastic change of heart, their privileged position will be taken away and the gospel invitation will go out to all people everywhere.

This is not just an interesting story from 2000 years ago – your invitation is real – God the Father is inviting you and I by name to share true and joyful fellowship with his Son Jesus. The big question is – what have you done with your invitation – have you recognised its significance and value or have you cast it aside without really even considering it?

Let us take a look at the imagery in the parable – the original guests represent the Jews who believed that being God's chosen people, i.e. being invited to the banquet was all that was required, and nothing else was needed for them to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Those who ignored or mistreated the servants sent to call them to join the celebration symbolise those who ignored, mistreated, and even killed the prophets who came to deliver God's message (and perhaps give a glimpse of what will happen to Jesus). The guests finally brought in to the wedding celebration are the gentiles, signifying that the Kingdom of God is now open to absolutely everyone, and we are told that all, good and bad alike, are invited to join in.

This seems quite straight forward and yet there are a number of things going on here which take us rather by surprise. We are led to understand that God issues an invitation, not a command to attend, and yet we hear that the King was angry when people refused to come and sent his troops to destroy these people and burn their city. That doesn't sound like a God of patience and compassion, nor does it suggest that we have any choice in the matter. And yet we notice that the King did not grow angry immediately when the people refused the invitation, in fact he sent his servants to plead with them and to try and entice them by telling them of all the good things he had prepared (I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered and everything is ready). This was an invitation to enjoy the very best in life and to share in joyful celebration with others, with the son and with the king himself. Still they refused, putting the everyday concerns of life before this amazing invitation and even went so far as to murder the messengers, and it was only at that point that the king became fiercely angry. So, the king is shown to be patient and merciful, and, despite resistance, he is not defeated. He is determined to have guests at the wedding feast and invites any who will hear, anyone who wants to accept what he is offering. The marriage will be celebrated after all, and those present can enjoy the perhaps unexpected honour of being able to attend the party – all seems well. But then we come to another rather shocking moment as the king spots someone without a wedding garment and rather than just having a quiet word requesting him to go and change, or even asking him to leave, he issues the drastic instruction 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' What's that all about? The response seems particularly extreme – surely the important thing is that the man has chosen to come – there is obviously more to it than might at first appear.

At every Eastern wedding like this, the one who gave the marriage feast always provided wedding garments for the guests to wear. There was no cost to the guests, they simply had to put the garment on and they could come to the feast. So why was there a man here without one? We find garments used many times in Scripture as symbols of righteousness. The wedding garment is therefore a picture of the righteousness of Jesus with which we are clothed in order that we can be in God's presence. Such righteousness does not come from anything we have done, nor from our background or anything we have inherited, nor from anything else we may hold to be of influence and value – it is a gift from God and indicates our total dependence on Jesus. The original language used here indicates that this particular man had deliberately refused to wear the required garment, implying that he was in rebellion against all that the wedding feast stood for – he was there under false pretences.

We might also question that final statement of Jesus 'Many are called but few are chosen'. It seems perverse to have answered the call, to have accepted the invitation, only to then be cast aside. But the truth is that there are many adherents of Christianity, but few who actually become disciples – many who are willing to come to the feast and be present with those in close fellowship with Jesus, but who themselves are not willing to exchange their own garments for the righteousness of Christ – those who profess Christianity, who sing hymns and read the scriptures, bowing their heads at the right time, but who cling to something in themselves in order to try and find favour with God, refusing to acknowledge and accept the lordship of Jesus Christ. And so the Lord makes the pronouncement, 'Many are called but few are chosen'.

We have all received an invitation to the heavenly banquet – what have you done with yours? There will be any number of responses to that question and Jesus warns against some of them in today's parable. He speaks of those who received their invitation a long time ago but who are distracted by the everyday cares and responsibilities of this life and do not value their invitation enough to set aside their own agendas. He mentions those who ignore and even despise the prophets who repeat God's invitation. He then affirms that the invitation is open to everyone, whoever they are and wherever they are from, but warns that attendance is conditional on putting on the provided garments of righteousness. The dire consequences for those who do not respect and value their invitation to take their place in the kingdom of heaven, are made perfectly clear.

What have you done with your invitation? Have you gathered it up with all the other 'special offers' and dumped it in the recycling bin without a second thought? Have you tucked it away in a drawer for safe keeping for when you've a spare moment? If, on the other hand you are thrilled to have received your invitation, quick to attend and delighted by what you find at the feast, then all that remains is to check what you are wearing...

## Prayers

(Including 'Just as I am, without one plea' Charlotte Elliott (1789 - 1871) © Jubilate Hymns Ltd)

Just as I am, without one plea but that you died to set me free, and at your bidding 'Come to me!' O Lamb of God, I come.

Just as I am, without delay, your call of mercy I obey your blood can wash my sins away: O Lamb of God, I come.

Thank you Lord, Lamb of God, for the invitation to feast with you in your kingdom of peace and joy. Thank you that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we have the robes of righteousness that enable us to be in your presence. Help us, not to delay, nor to consider other things more important, but to put you first in our lives and to take our place at your side.

Just as I am, though tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt, fightings within and fears without, O Lamb of God, I come.

Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind! Sight, riches, healing of the mind, all that I need, in you to find: O Lamb of God, I come.

Jesus even though we recognise your call on our lives we find, in these days of uncertainty, that we have conflicting emotions, moments of doubt, and yet a longing to come to you knowing that you are the source of our hope and our help. Bless your church as we seek to honour you in ways that are unfamiliar. Bind us together in your love and help us keep our eyes focussed on you. Lord you know only too well that things are not as they should be in this world, and that many are hungry, homeless, lonely, or living in pain and fear. Help us to play our part in sharing the earth's resources and in providing for those in need. By your Holy Spirit, move in the lives of those who feel no-one cares, that they might hear and respond to your invitation to come to you and to know your love.

Just as I am! You will receive, will welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve: because your promise I believe, O Lamb of God, I come.

Just as I am! Your love unknown has broken every barrier down: now to be yours, yes, yours alone, O Lamb of God, I come.

Lord we come to you in our times of pain and struggle, knowing that you care for us and for those we love. We pause as we lift to you those in particular need of physical, mental and emotional healing at this time....

We hold before you those who have put up barriers to knowing you, fearing the vulnerability that comes with such openness. Give them the courage and trust to allow you into their hearts and lives. We pray for all prisoners - those who are held behind locked doors and those whose prison is of their own making, or formed through the pain and fear caused by others. Loving God would you bring freedom and release.

Just as I am! Of that free love, the breadth, length, depth and height to prove, here for a time and then above, O Lamb of God, I come.

Lamb of God, we pray for those who have died in recent days and for those who mourn their loss. Help us to keep a clear vision of the life to which you call us - that which will last for all eternity in the kingdom of your love.

At your bidding 'Come to me', Oh Lamb of God I come. **Amen**

The words of this final song remind us that we live to serve God, but we do so in garments that he has provided for us.

### **Song**

King of kings, majesty, God of heaven living in me.

Gentle saviour, closest friend, Strong deliverer, beginning and end:

All within me falls at your throne.

*Your majesty, I can but bow; I lay my all before you now.*

*In royal robes I don't deserve, I live to serve your majesty.*

Earth and heaven worship you, Love eternal, faithful and true,

Who bought the nations, ransomed souls, Brought this sinner near to your throne:

All within me cries out in praise.

SoF 1404 Jarrod Cooper © 1996 Sovereign Lifestyle Music

### **Prayer**

God thank you that you not only invite us to be with you but that you provide all we need to make that possible. May we respond with willing and joyful hearts.

And now may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen**