

**SERMON AT 8.00 AM HOLY COMMUNION (BCP)
AT ST AGNES' CHURCH, FRESHWATER BAY ON
SUNDAY 15TH OCTOBER 2017 (18TH SUNDAY
AFTER TRINITY) BY JAMES COOK**

Readings: Philippians 4.1-9 and Matthew 22.1-14.

Title: 'You are invited'

Aim: To help us to recognise and accept God's invitation.

How we feel about an invitation depends of course upon what kind of invitation it is. Who is it from? What is the occasion to which we are invited? Then there are questions concerning my obligations:

What should I wear?

How will I get there?

What kind of present should I take?

How will I get along with my fellow guests?

In the Bible, we come across countless invitations from God to participate in the good things that he has to share with us. In today's Gospel reading, God's invitation is pictured as being like an invitation issued by a king to attend the wedding banquet of his son. We are all invited to participate in the 'marriage' of Jesus Christ – his eternal relationship with all who are willing to receive his love.

Bible commentators are generally agreed that those to whom the invitation is first sent are Jesus' own people, the Jews. These are people with very special responsibilities and privileges to live as God's people.

The king in the story, like God our heavenly Father, does not want those he has called to miss out, so he repeats the invitation. The wedding feast is to be a marvellous affair – the best party ever – and it would be foolish to say 'no'.

Everything is ready, says the king, but those to whom the invitation has been sent make light of it. Have we ever regarded a relationship with God as unimportant, something to take second place to our work, our family life, our friendships or our hobbies? What is perhaps worse, have we ridiculed or mistreated the servants of God who bring his message of love?

The guests in the story who refuse the king's invitation and who abuse his representatives suffer terrible consequences. History testifies to the dreadful sufferings of the Jewish people – treatment by fellow human beings that of course should never be condoned.

Despite the awful tragedy that followed the rejection of the original invitation, the king persists in his aim of bringing everyone into a loving relationship with his son.

The king, like God our Father, issues his invitation to everyone – good and bad alike. If God does not regard

some people as more deserving than others to have a loving relationship with Jesus Christ, then neither may we.

While God's invitation is issued to good and bad alike, we find not everyone is accepted into the party – into God's kingdom. We are accepted, not because we are inherently good – for none of us is – but because of the way God 'clothes' us as his guests.

In the story that Jesus tells, there is a guest who is not allowed into the party because he is not wearing a 'wedding robe'. To us, this seems very harsh, and so some explanation is called for. Bible commentators differ in their views about wedding customs in first century Palestine, but the general understanding is that the guest tried to be admitted on his terms rather than those of his generous host. He was therefore refused entry.

We are admitted into God's presence not because of our own righteousness, but because of God's righteousness, which we wear like a robe. In Isaiah 61.10 we read:

“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of
salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of
righteousness...”

In Colossians 3.9-10, Paul tells his readers:

“...you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.”

The ‘new self’, with which we are to be clothed as guests of God the Father, is the wedding robe that we receive through faith in Jesus Christ and his death for us on the cross.

In Romans 3.14, Paul urges his readers to ‘put on the Lord Jesus Christ’. In Galatians 3.27, he reminds us that our baptism signifies this transformation: “...as many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

I began today by suggesting we think about what we might wear at God’s wedding feast: we have heard that we are to be clothed with God’s righteousness.

I talked about how we might get to the feast, and I have mentioned that we come to it by faith in Jesus Christ and his death on the cross for our sakes.

At the beginning, I also mentioned the matter of a wedding gift. I would like to suggest that the only possible gift we may bring to our relationship with God is ourselves – our whole selves. As we sing on Good Friday about God’s love revealed on the wondrous cross of Jesus,

‘love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all’.

What we wear to the party, how we get there and what gift we bring: these were my first three questions for us. The fourth was: “How easy will it be to get along with my fellow guests?” This was not a question that is addressed directly in the story that Jesus told, but it arises in the passage set as our Epistle reading today.

In the Epistle to the Philippians, Paul writes to those who have accepted God’s invitation to come to the wedding banquet of his Son. Two of them he describes as those who ‘struggled beside me in the work of the gospel’ and ‘whose names are in the book of life’. They may be at the party, but at the moment they are not getting on together. Paul urges Euodia and Syntyche ‘to be of the same mind in the Lord’.

Please, in our churches here in West Wight, let us make sure that when disagreements arise, as surely they will, we resolve them swiftly and graciously. If we do, we will continue to enjoy the party and others will want to join us. Amen.