

## The wrong clothes

Matt.22:11-14

The gospel today has two stories in it - which appear at first sight to be just one. We have first of all the story of the wedding feast - and the eventual going out and compelling passers-by to come and enjoy the feast - teaching the Jews about how the Gentiles would be brought into the sphere of the covenant of God's love in Christ. And then, tacked on the end, we have this other story of how the King comes in to find that some of the guests weren't properly dressed, and how he had them thrown out on their ear. The stories can't be connected really - how could any King expect people who have been stopped in the street to have been ready for a feast. No - we have here *two* stories Jesus told, both about wedding feasts. And it is the second one - the story of the people with the wrong clothes on - that I want to look at briefly now.

I suppose all of us have been in the position of having the wrong clothes at some stage or other, either the common failing of going out without a mac, and getting drenched, or wearing one and getting roasted in the sun, or the far more embarrassing thing of really getting the wrong clothes - turning up at a party in a sports jacket and finding everyone else in a dinner jacket, and the like.

Going out in a rush can result in this. I went out for a meal with one of the Cathedral canons years ago - and it was only when I was half way there I realised that I had my suit jacket on with a pair of trousers which didn't match. I had rushed out too fast. And it was embarrassing, although I don't expect anyone noticed. But the situation is far more serious for the people in the parable. They are not threatened with embarrassment, but with being bound, head and foot, and cast into outer darkness, where there is weeping and grinding of teeth - it always sounds like a description of a dentist to me, but there we are! It is a strange story, and rather disturbing. I think it will help us a great deal to realise that in all probability, Jesus was using a story that his listeners already knew - it was a parable that was used by the rabbis of his time.

Let me tell you two of these Rabbinic stories, so that you can see what I mean. They told the story of a King who invited guests to a feast, but gave no definite time or date. But with the invitation he sent the warning that they must wash and dress and anoint themselves so that they could come immediately when the time was announced. Some of the guests were wise, and got themselves ready straight away and went and stood outside the palace gate. They knew that the King had huge numbers of servants, and the feast could be made ready very quickly indeed. Some of the others - the foolish ones, decided that preparations couldn't be made without them hearing about it, and went on with their normal business. When they heard about the start of the preparations they could step work, and wash and change. Then suddenly the King announced that the feast was ready, and the wise ones sat down to eat, but the others didn't have time to wash and change, and they had to sit outside, sad and hungry, thinking about the joy that they had missed through their foolishness. And of course the Rabbis here were teaching how it was the Jews duty to be ready at all times for the summons of God. The second story the Rabbis told was about the King and clothes. There was a King who gave his servants wonderful royal robes. Some of them took them and stored them away carefully. Others thought it was a waste to hide them away, and wore them, and of course they got stained and worn. Then one day the King asked for his clothes to be returned. The people who had kept them stored away gave them back to be hung in the royal wardrobe, and the King thanked them and bade them 'Go in peace'. The others took the

dirty clothes back, King was angry and sent the robes to be cleaned, and had the people who had spoiled them put in prison. And what the Rabbis were after in this story was to teach that a man must hand his soul back to God in its original clean and pure state. The man whose hands back a soiled suit stands condemned.

You will see the connections with Jesus' parable only too well. He was taking something very familiar to them all. Like the Rabbis' stories it is about judgement, and our accountability to God. The ideal of the Kingdom of God as a great feast was something he had taught before, We remember that teaching each time we come to communion, because this is meant, amongst other things, to be a foretaste of the great heavenly banquet. But will we be fit to partake? Will we have the right clothes? What are the right clothes anyway? Jesus makes it quite clear in his teaching, that the only demand he makes of us for entry into the Kingdom of heaven is repentance. It is the new life, the new person which the clothes stand for. In the parable, someone has tried to get into Kingdom without the new life which Christ offers, without repentance. This is very searching in its teaching. Because the story implies that all sorts of people can appear to be ready for the feast - lots of people come in and sit down and it is only later that they are shown up to be unprepared. It is the principle of the open door, the idea of the wheat and tares growing up together. It will only be at the end that we will be seen to be what we really are. We are offered the grace of God - but grace is, as has been often said, a costly thing. We cannot accept the grace of God and continue as we are. We are to behave in a way which is consistent with our profession. We are to be changed. We can't gaily say - well, if I go on the same old way, it's alright - it's God's nature to forgive. However true that is, to think in that kind of way shows that we have not really repented at all. I suppose it is true to say that the way we do things shows how we really think about them. If we go to visit a friend, we wash and change - we think it impolite to go to tea with someone wearing a shirt with oil stains down the front from when we repaired the car. What we wear indicates how we feel about the person we visit. It is the same when we come to church. I am not, I hasten to add, trying to advocate the old idea of Sunday clothes, or that going to church in an open-neck shirt or whatever is wrong - far from it. No, what I mean in that the mental clothes we wear, the attitude of mind in which we come, makes all the difference. Do we come prepared, with our wedding garments on? And I would point out that wedding garments of the time of Jesus were nothing special - you might substitute the phrase, "Clean Clothes". Do we come prepared to worship, settled in our minds that God is God, and that we have come to adore him? Do we come prepared to learn from him as we listen to the lessons being read? Are we wearing wedding garments of expectation? I fear that too often, we get here in a rush, with our hat straight, but our thoughts crooked, with clean hands but smudged souls. Which is more important, as we come to worship? We know perfectly well. Are we *prepared* to come to communion? Are we in love and charity with our neighbours? Are we intending to lead a new life? If we are, if we have taken time to think afresh what we have come to do, then our wedding garment is on. If we are not.... well. Think hard.

No-one begrudges the time taken to dress up for a special occasion. We don't regard the preparations as a chore. I suppose that women more than men enjoy the preparations almost as much as the event itself - perhaps buying a new hat for a wedding, having their hair done, and so on. It is part of the joy of the whole occasion. Our preparation, our repentance, our moments of quietness before we come, and when we arrive - these things are not burdensome - they are part of the joy of the whole occasion - they add to it, and make it what it should be.