

We come because we want to know God, who seeks to shape us as faithful people.
Not that we already are, but we strive to be the community of grace.
We come because we want to know Jesus, who would plant justice deep in our hearts.
Not that we always do, but we seek to welcome each person.
We come because we want to know the Spirit, who shines hope on all people.
Not that we always are able, but we seek to share the light of peace in our world.

Great is thy faithfulness <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liQzzc41z5Q>

Prayer

When we realize how we are blessed beyond every imagining,
we sing of your surprising grace and your steadfast presence
in a world which has grown deaf from the noise of empty clichés.
When we remember your love which has no beginning and no end,
we can rejoice in your hope which sees every person,
even those we would never invite into our circles, as your beloved child.
When we remember your call to treat every single person with dignity, justice, and hope,
we can share your peace with a society which believes violence is the solution to every problem.
God in Community, Holy in One, as you live in us, so we will live for others,
And commit ourselves to you again as we pray the prayer taught by Jesus, (*The Lord's Prayer*)

Matthew 22: 1-13

Come to the banquet <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czRLWLOoqi8>

Prayer

You would call us to your feast, Inviting God, but our busy lives keep us from responding. You remember every word we utter, every prayer we whisper, but we forget all the ways you care for us. You would make your grace known through us, but we do not offer it to others.
Forgive us, God and help us live in your way, following the example Jesus set us. Through him, we can learn the dreams you have for us. With him, we can open our arms and embrace all the people we meet. At the Wedding Feast, we are fed with grace, and nourished with joy, so we may go and bring hope and peace to everyone we meet. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sermon

We are probably somewhat mystified by the behavior of the characters in this story. An initial invitation to come to a feast is rejected. That's odd, surely nobody turns down a royal summons, but it's not deeply troubling. A second invitation follows with descriptions of the elaborate preparations-- it's going to be delicious! Who wouldn't come to this party? But those invited are apparently unimpressed, and return to their business activities. Again, this is unusual behavior -- but it's the kind of strangeness we have learned to expect in a parable. However, now things really get out of hand - the servants sent by the king to announce the party are seized, abused, and murdered. We didn't see that coming! And the weirdness and violence are just getting started. In retaliation, the king goes to war against his own people. Enraged by their actions he unleashes an army. Before we know it, the murderers are murdered, and a city is a pile of smoldering ash. But - the dinner is still on! The King sends out messengers with the good news again and again and invites everyone to the wedding banquet, both good and bad. This is a God who will not give up on us, and that is great news indeed!

Like the parables of the last few weeks, this is a clear indictment against the religious leaders who should have been willing to accept God's invitation but who refuse. The king's response in the parable must not be taken literally as God's response to the leaders, but it does serve to indicate that God does not simply accept their rejection of Christ. Then there is the shock of the person who is rejected for having the wrong clothes. Of course the guy isn't dressed properly -- he was pulled in off the street at the last minute!

The new guests are beneficiaries of an unexpectedly generous invitation, they must nevertheless be on guard against the complacency shown by the first invitees. The doors of the kingdom community are thrown wide open, and the invitation extends literally to all. But once you come in, there are standards. Not that we have to wear our "Sunday Best" but the kingdom of heaven is a banquet and you've got to respect that. Karl Barth put it like this: "In the last resort, it all boils down to the fact that the invitation is to a feast, and that those who do not obey and come accordingly, and therefore festively, decline and spurn the invitation no less than those who are unwilling to obey and appear at all." This suggests that entrance into God's reign requires us to adopt the "clothes" (the ways of being) of God's reign. Those who aren't willing to be completely covered in God's mercy, that is, the wedding gown, will be cutting themselves off. When we put on the wedding robe we are dressed with things such as love, joy, peace, kindness, patience, selflessness, grace, acceptance, blessing, harmony and forgiveness. The invitation is open to all, but we only experience God's life when we allow God's reign into us. With that as the background, then, we can see both the invitation and the confrontation of God's reign.

It can be hard to hold both confrontation and invitation together as we seek to follow Jesus in the world. It is all too easy to emphasise confrontation, judge those with whom we disagree, stand against our opponents and the even adopt some form of violence – think of the crusades and the Spanish inquisition and the violence of the reformation. On the other hand it is all too easy to emphasise God's invitation, be naive about evil, and run the risk of bringing those who need protection into harm's way because the ones who threaten them are allowed to continue unchecked. It is crucial then, that we hold these two elements of the Gospel together, recognising that God's reign does not seek only to bring all people in, but seeks also to get in to all people. It is important that we follow Jesus' lead in confronting evil and those who perpetrate it. It is important that we hold ourselves and others accountable to God's standards of grace and justice and peace.

One of the strengths of the Wesleyan revival was that in the class meetings, accountability and confrontation were built into the process of coming to Christ and joining the community.

However, it is also important that we follow Jesus' lead in welcoming all people, especially the excluded, marginalised and vulnerable. It is important that, like Jesus, we seek to bring grace and healing, justice and basic survival requirements to those who need it. It is impossible to work for justice effectively unless we do both. And so, this week, we find ourselves challenged to stand against systems, leaders (political, economic, or religious) and structures in the name of justice, equality and peace. We may do this by speaking out, by using our vote, or by praying and living in ways that demonstrate the qualities of God's reign. But, we also find ourselves challenged to stand with those who are excluded and oppressed. We can do this by working to meet the needs of those who struggle, by marching with those who protest injustice, by giving of our resources to help those in need, or by simply developing relationships with those who need to be welcomed. Both invitation and confrontation happen together – often simultaneously. Grace is not “soft” or “cheap”. It is powerful and transforming if only we allow Jesus to teach us how to live it.

It is not a compromise to welcome those who have been excluded, those who are different, those who need love, direction, help, basic needs or a place to belong. It is not a compromise to put relationship above law, and to stay faithful to relationships even when we disagree. The challenge of the Gospel is to learn to confront graciously and to welcome with integrity.

Some people come to church on Sunday morning and have no interest in changing their lives. It's all about getting in the door to heaven and not about being transformed by relationship with Christ. They have no interest in working on behalf of the poor or seeing the structures in society that our lives benefit from, systems of injustice and oppression, where the poor remain poor and the rich get richer. When we enter into relationship with Christ, we are called into a deeper relationship with others. We are called to see the needs of our neighbor and to love our neighbors as ourselves. The Christian faith is not something you can pay lip service to; it requires a transformation of our lives. When we follow Jesus and look to helping our neighbors, our wedding robes are put on, and we accept the invitation fully, not just to attend but to take part.

O God, you invite us! You seek to delight us.
Your table is ready for those who say "Yes!"
Do we make excuses when you want to choose us
To sit at your table, forgiven and blessed?
And, Lord, as you welcome us into your kingdom,
May we reach to welcome the world by your grace.
You love the outsider. Now may we reach wider
To welcome the world with your loving embrace. by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette.

Vagabonds <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s27D7M8biul>
(or with full words) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdner5jnA34>

Prayer

This Prisons Week as we pray for all those connected with the criminal justice system in any way, including all prison staff and families of prisoners as well as prisoners themselves, let us not talk of social distancing but rather of physical distancing. Let us pray for social connection and restored relationship and an openness to the generous love of God who longs to draw close to every individual person, treasured and known by name. We pray that amid both places of brokenness and beauty there might be a discovery of inner freedom and peace which is rooted in the love, hope and peace of God revealed in Jesus Christ and present through the power of the Holy Spirit, never locked down. – Rt Revd Rachel Treweek, Bishop of Gloucester:

Spirit of God, who dwells within people and places, help us magnify your kindness and goodness to overcome ignorance, alienation and hostility, to be able to see each other as people created and connected in God's image. Humble us by your power that we might have the courage to come together, physically distanced but united in purpose, called by name to serve God and our neighbours. Pour your gifts upon us, so that we can fulfil your trust in us to do our part, that your kingdom may come on earth as it is in heaven.

Spirit of wisdom and mercy, lead those responsible for exercising justice in the way of truth; bring discernment, fair minded judgement and a willingness to confront injustice as they consider the lives of others. In every role and place of work through the whole criminal justice system, guide and empower people to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with Christ in his strength and in his Spirit.

Lord, you offer freedom to all people. We pray for those in prison. Break the bonds of fear and isolation that exist. Support with your love prisoners and their families and friends, prison staff and all who care. Heal those who have been wounded by the actions of others, especially the victims of crime. Help us to forgive one another, to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with Christ in his strength and in his Spirit. Amen

Let us build a house <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKJgcv8SdnQ>

We will go now, as faithful people, so others might know God.
We will seek to invite others into this community of grace.
We will go now, as seeds of justice, so others might know Jesus.
We will seek to welcome all who have been rejected by the world.
We will go now, to be lights of hope, so others might know the Spirit.
We will seek to illuminate the shadows of brokenness with peace and life.

The Lords my shepherd <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yLxdb3ov-zE>