

¹Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ²“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴Again 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.’ ⁵But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. ⁷The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ ¹⁰Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

¹¹“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹²and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. ¹³Then 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.’ ¹⁴For many are called, but few are chosen.”

In the year 2009, theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking threw a dinner party, and no one attended. Hawking’s life’s work was so profound that he became a figure of pop culture, and a movie about his life earned the actor who portrayed Dr. Hawking – Eddie Redmayne – the Academy Award for best actor. Yet, despite all that the actual Stephen Hawking had accomplished up to that point in his life in 2009, when he hosted that dinner party, no one showed up. Three trays of fancy hors d'oeuvres went untouched. Multiple bottles of champagne – each costing at least a couple hundred dollars – went to waste. No one showed up to see the balloons Stephen had arranged to

adorn the walls, nor did anyone take notice of the large welcome banner created for the event, stating, “Welcome, Time Travellers!” Wait, what? Hawking’s dinner was actually a science experiment. His work in theoretical physics had led him to the conclusion that time travel from the future to the past is an impossibility. As any good scientist does, he created an experiment. Normally, this would involve finding ways to probe the dimensions of space and time. However, in this case, Dr. Hawking went with a far more practical test of his theory. He would throw a dinner party and after it was over he would send the invitations. It was a standing invitation, meaning that any potential time traveler – no matter how far into the future from whence they shall come – was encouraged to attend. The invitation provided the date, time, and coordinates for the occasion, to avoid any confusion. Those details and the invitation can be easily found online. Hawking said, “I’m hoping copies of [the invitation], in one form or another, will survive for many thousands of years.” Later, when describing why he had thrown such a peculiar yet spectacular party, he said, “I like simple experiments ... and champagne.”

In today’s gospel, Jesus tells a parable about a king who throws a wedding party, and all the original invitees decline to show up. The key to not getting bogged down by the peculiarities of this parable is to remember that it is about God’s invitation to us, and the consequences of that invitation. We know that is the key because the Greek form of the word “invite” occurs five times in the parable. Most importantly is that when that word is used to describe the king’s action of inviting, it is in the “perfect tense” of the verb. The English language doesn’t have a clear equivalent to the Greek perfect tense, but what it means is that an action began in the past and that the action continues into the future forever. In this case, the king issued the invitations to the banquet, and the king’s invitation remains open forever... kind of like Stephen Hawking’s invitation that was offered and will continue to be offered forever.

Let’s be clear that at first the king appears to be wonderful and extremely gracious. He issues the invitations, and word comes back that all the invitees aren’t coming. So the king sends back the invitations a second time to the same people, telling them how wonderful of a celebration it will be. At this point, some of the messengers who carried the invitations were seized by those who were invited, some were mistreated, and some were even killed. You are correct in thinking that this

whole scenario is unrealistic and that this violence is a rather unexpected twist. There is a reason for that. Also, the whiplash of the story should be a reminder that this is a parable. Its intent is to help us understand an aspect of the reign of God better. So while it expects us to take the parable seriously, it does not expect us to read it literally.

Remember that in last week's parable, there was a landowner who sent messengers and ultimately his own son to check on his land, but his hired tenants seized them, mistreated them, and even killed some of them. At that point, Jesus paused the parable in order to pose this question, "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" There were some religious leaders present who wanted to find a reason to arrest Jesus. They answered that the landowner should treat those tenants in the same way. Those same leaders have stuck around for today's parable. The king's change in character in the second half of today's parable should not be understood as a change in God's demeanor. Rather, it's Jesus using this parable to tell those leaders, "Okay, if you think the main character should retaliate, I'll give you a parable with that retaliation." Jesus uses the abrupt change to startle those religious leaders and drive home a point for all listeners about obedience.

Remember that the main point of the landowner parable is that God desires peace and justice to be cultivated, and people within God's reign shouldn't make excuses to avoid that work. Today's parable of the king's banquet is a continuation of that theme. God's open invitation is intended for everyone; as our translation says the invitation is extended to both the "good and bad." However, it isn't about morality, it is about God inviting both desirable people and undesirable people. God invites them all to come to this banquet, and that invitation remains open forever. The word of caution, however, is highlighted by the guest who is kicked out for not wearing the right clothes. The parable says the guest was speechless when confronted about his attire, which meant that he knew what he was doing was wrong, but he did it anyway. In other words, this guest isn't being caught off guard. The symbolism of the wrong attire is meant to highlight that – just as there are assumed standards today for how people dress and behave at social functions, like weddings – there is the assumed standard that when we accept God's invitation, we will then seek to do God's will.

When we accept God's gracious invitation to join this wonderfully great thing that God is doing, we can't expect that this means there will be no changes in us. The appropriate attire for this wedding is obedience to God's will, and these parables reveal that striving for peace and justice is the obedience that God desires. Apparently, however, those particular religious leaders did not – or would not – grasp that idea. They felt they were on the right side with God, but they were not willing to work for peace among all people and justice for every neighbor. God's invitation is open, and as people who have responded positively to that invitation, we should understand that there are expectations for us. Namely, that living in God's reign means that we should do that different and regular self-examination of whether we truly striving for peace and justice throughout the world.

Once you and I receive the grace of God, everything changes. God extends that invitation, and it impacts all of our lives. That grace comes to fruit in our lives as we strive to be obedient to God, by being bearers of God's peace and justice in this world. Living an unchanged life after receiving this grace isn't an option. So, we receive the invitation to the banquet, and we find our way to a changing room, because this party means it is time for us to live a new life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.