



Parables of Jesus

The Wedding Feast

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1 Corinthians 2 Matthew 22: 1-14

In 1976, a young Douglas Adams, destined to write the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, arrived at Cambridge station to catch a train to London. Realising he was early for his train, he went to the buffet and bought a newspaper, a cup of coffee and a packet of biscuits. He found a table and sat down ... with his newspaper, his coffee and his packet of biscuits.

Opposite him sat an unremarkable man in a business suit, with a briefcase. He didn't give the appearance that he was going to do anything strange. But all of a sudden he leant forward, picked up the biscuits, tore them open, took one out and ate it.

Reflecting on this event later on to an American chat show audience, Douglas Adams said, "This is the sort of thing the British are very bad at dealing with. There's nothing in our background, upbringing or education that teaches you how to deal with someone who, in broad daylight, has stolen your biscuits. You know what would have happened in South Central Los Angeles. There would very quickly have been gunfire, helicopters coming in, CNN, you know ... But in the end, I did what any red-blooded Englishman would have done: I ignored it. I stared at my newspaper, took a sip of coffee, tried to do the crossword, couldn't do anything, and thought, what am I going to do?"

"In the end I thought, 'Nothing for it, I'll just have to go for it', and I tried very hard not to notice the fact that the packet was mysteriously open. I took out a biscuit for myself! I thought, that settled him. But it hadn't, because a moment or two later he did it again. He took another biscuit. Because I hadn't mentioned it first time it was even harder to raise the subject a second time around. 'Excuse me, I couldn't help but notice ...' It just doesn't really work."

"We went through the whole packet like this. There were only about 8 biscuits, but it felt like a lifetime. He took one. I took one. He took one. I took one. Finally, when we got to the end, he stood up and walked away. Well, we exchanged meaningful looks, then he walked away, and I breathed a sigh of relief and sat back. A moment or two later the train was coming so I tossed back the rest of my coffee, stood up, picked up the newspaper and underneath it were my biscuits."

He concluded, "The thing I particularly like about this story is the thought that somewhere in England for the last quarter of a century there's been a perfectly ordinary guy who's had exactly the same story, only he didn't have the punch line."

As this story illustrates, perspective is central to our interpretation of events around us. I do not claim that this is a great insight on my part. In fact, it's trite. But for all that, it is, strangely, something which is routinely forgotten.

Pick up any remotely mainstream commentary on the parable of the wedding feast, and you will hear that the tale sketches our refusal to respond to the graceful offer of salvation. The king is God the Father, and there are no prizes for working out that the son, for whom the wedding feast is prepared, represents Jesus Christ. The son having come into the world, the feast which the king has prepared stands for our opportunity to enter into communion with God via his incarnate son. The king offers nothing but free grace: a place at the banquet, food and wine, and joyful celebration. Who in their right mind would refuse such an offer?

Yet the hard-hearted servants encountered by the king's messengers turn their back. Worse, they mock and kill the messengers sent to invite them. No wonder the king was wrath. Their rejection was the rejection of those who refuse to hear the good news: their evisceration in what follows is reasonable, deserved even. But, grace upon grace, the king offers his hospitality again, this time even more widely and freely than before. The A-List invitees having disgraced themselves, the king rejects the notion of preferential guests entirely. Anyone can come to the feast: hoi polloi, 'both good and bad', those wandering the streets as they go about their normal business are bidden to the king's table to share his joy and his munificence.

But there's a catch. Though the king is gracious, he expects those to whom he offers his hospitality to give something back. With such a generous king in charge of the city, prone to showering favour on his people at next to no notice, it is only natural that the citizens should go about ready for the feast, clothed properly, able to fit in at the party. The guest who arrives at the feast without his wedding garment has only himself to blame: his speechlessness is a sign of the regret of the unworthy, of someone who ought to have known better, to have shown if not gratitude then at least readiness for the largesse of the king. No one likes an ungrateful guest. The outer darkness – with its ostracization, social death and irrelevance – is where such people rightly belong. Augustine thought that the wedding garment which the guest lacked was love. And St Paul famously reminded us that, whatever gifts we possess, if we possess them without love, we are nothing.

In a book called *Reading the Bible with the Damned*, the American theologian Bob Ekblad described his experiences of digesting scripture with undocumented migrants, gang members and inmates of all flavours in a rough county jail in Washington state. It was during these encounters that Ekblad became aware of a dangerous complacency in the way many people interpret the bible, and thus shape their perception of and relationship to God.

Their lives at a low ebb (to put it mildly), for the prisoners and migrants – the damned – the bible was not a source of reassurance or an aid to calm self-examination, but confirmation of their subjugation. And it was that because they brought to it their preconceptions that society was inevitably ordered in a way which had no place for them. God was an impossibly demanding celestial sovereign, a souped-up version of the police and judges who had already, in their own lives, sentenced them to the furthest margins of society. The norms of obedience and exemplarism, standards by which they were keenly aware that they had already failed, were, they thought, to be found writ large and over an eternal time frame in the pages of the bible.

As Ekblad's comfortable top-down perspective of scripture was challenged by these darker interpretations, he tried to encourage the damned to read the stories by looking for themselves in them. Soon the men were identifying with the tax collectors and the sinners, the unclean and the despised, those held in contempt by the respectable pillars of society.

It took the assurance of Ekblad, pointing out that it was in the very midst of these communities that Jesus was to be found, and not in the centres of civil and religious power, before the damned men could begin to see liberating narratives in the text: stories which subverted the very notion of the margins by having Jesus set up his kingdom there. Suddenly scripture was a light shone on their experience with the scandalous implication that they weren't the problem, but in fact part of the solution. Their perspective changed, as did that of Ekblad, and that made all the difference.

Most commentators, and I dare say most of us here now, read the parable of the wedding feast in a top down way, accepting what appears to be its implicit social order, because to do so involves making assumptions about the way the world works which have suited us well in our own lives. A powerful sovereign is a good thing atop a stable civil structure. The enforcement of laws against those who would subvert them protects us and our property. Codified systems of good manners (like those concerning dress) are helpful tools as we navigate our way up the greasy pole of prosperity, reputation and advancement.

But what if we try to approach the parable through the other end of the telescope, from the bottom up – from the point of view not of the righteous sovereign but the anonymous man cast into outer darkness? One doesn't have to press very hard to see something really very sinister emerge.

For this man, the wedding feast is no celebration. It is another day of obligation. To us, today, a wedding is a time of joy and celebration. But a royal wedding in ancient times was pre-eminently about reinforcing power and entrenching dominance. The king here 'makes' the marriage for his son, no doubt choosing the bride, and fixing the terms and the shape of the celebrations. The proud, loving and altruistic father of our instinctive reading becomes a scheming autocrat, anxious about dynastic (and essentially self-) preservation. The meal which he offers is not for the enjoyment of the guests but for his own reflected glory. Note how the guests are not invited so much as bidden or summoned. Don't come because there'll be a warm welcome, or because I really want you here: come because I'm telling you to, just as I dictate every other aspect of how you live your subservient lives.

Those told to attend mock the king's servants. Now tyrants can cope with being feared and hated: it cements their domination. But one thing they cannot stand is being laughed at. At this moment in the parable we feel the king's authority slipping. And against that disintegration there is the wanton violence of the first round of intended guests, slaying the servants of the king. And not just killing them – these hired hands, miserable in their own way – but doing it with spite.

This wedding day is dark. There is no joy: just fear, intimidation and blood.

But the king tries again: the desperate dictator facing the contemptuous, laughing crowd, clutches at straws in an attempt to salvage his power. Invite anyone! Go even out onto the highways and take whoever is passing: any poor, lowly, subsistence level worker, busy trying to make enough to stay alive, will do. Whichever of these you find, bring them to me to serve as ornaments at my celebration of myself and my power. So the henchmen go out and the system of fear and repression and obligation fills the seats with bodies. The king comes in to receive his reward, to survey the plastic adulation of his people, but someone isn't playing his game.

The anonymous man sits before the king without his wedding garment, a conspicuous, scandalous reminder of the reality which the king won't accept - that these people have not come to celebrate but to conform. The reality that this wedding is no celebration of love: there's no love for this king. The reality that the king's generosity is not for others but is a

means of glorifying himself. The reality that the value of other people is not the service they can render to the king but their own inherent worth.

The speechlessness of the man isn't a defeat but is the silence in which the penny finally, noisily, drops for the king. No longer can he triumph through the complacent enforcement of power. The rules have changed: someone now stands before him in silence and by and through that very act of peace, in the face of oppression, triumphs in a way which the king can never hope to do. This is a victorious silence and it defeats a king. In only a few chapters' time, silence will make another victorious return. An obscure carpenter, with no special clothing, will stand silently before the questions of a Roman governor when on trial for his life.

This silence of the man in the parable, just like the peace of Christ, can't be corralled. It can't be contained. It can't be subordinated to dynasties or a higher authority. The king tries to: he orders that the man is bound and cast into darkness, into a bin where the king can try to forget about him and his crazy ideas. But binding the man will not help the king. We recall how Jesus prevailed over the bonds of the Gerasene demoniac, liberating him. And Christ himself, before he is brought before Pilate, is bound. But those bonds will not contain him, and neither will the tomb.

The missing wedding garment of the parable is no longer a sign of shame and poverty, but a reminder of the willingness of Christ to break bread with anyone, tax collectors and sinners even, however they are dressed, at a meal where (unlike at the wedding feast) people are present because they participate in a community based on love and not fear.

Suddenly the outer darkness doesn't seem so dark, and the wailing and gnashing of teeth belong to those left behind at the loveless parody of a feast. We are called not to that meal, but to break bread at Christ's table.

I end with these thoughts. There are multiple other ways to read this (and any) parable. The great gift of parables is their mystery. They refuse ever to be solved, not only because of their inherent ambiguity but because what we might make of that ambiguity changes constantly as we, storied and situated readers, change. This dynamic mystery is not some clever parlour game, or an intellectual cop out to excuse a failure of insight. Instead it reflects the never static, always changing mystery of our relationship with God.

Douglas Adams, a convinced atheist, once said, "God ... would need an insurmountable amount of explaining." I think, without realising it, that he was making a valid theological point.