



## Anyone who has ears to hear...

James Crampsey SJ

The parable of the great banquet (Matthew 22:1-14) comes to a dramatic conclusion when the guest who is not wearing a wedding garment is thrown out of the king's house. James Crampsey SJ helps us to make sense of the sequence of events in Matthew's version (which differs from Luke's). If we pay close attention to what we hear elsewhere, what might we pick up in this parable?

When we read or hear the parables of Jesus in the gospel tradition, there are some that move us, some that puzzle us and some that make us say 'it's not fair'. Sometimes we are only echoing what is felt or said by one of the characters in the parable. In the [parable of the prodigal son](#) (Luke 15:11-32), we hear the complaint pulsating through the words of the older brother. We are likely to agree with him, especially if we have no wild side ourselves.

Another parable where fairness comes to the fore is that of the [labourers in the vineyard](#) (Matthew 20:1-16) where a bit of a mutiny is boiling up at the lack of discrimination in the payments. Our sense of fairness is also aroused by the parable of the wise and foolish virgins: 'Why didn't the wise virgins share with the foolish ones?' Matthew's is the only gospel to carry this episode (25:1-12)... but we might think we have heard it elsewhere.

### *Did you hear the one about...?*

We often hear a story and think it sounds familiar, even if we have not heard that exact version before. That is as true of parables as it is of any other story form. The similarities between parables has to do with the repertoire of characters and outcomes. There are feasts, kings, guests, servants, landowners; there are happy endings



and unhappy endings, people being fully included and people being excluded. Sometimes stories seem to fuse into one another.

There are echoes of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in a parable attributed to the rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai, who lived around the time of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, just after Jesus and more or less contemporary

with Matthew.

So did you hear the one about the feast to which the wise and foolish servants were invited? (Note that the introduction to this segment of the Babylonian Talmud, 'We learned elsewhere...' is an alternative to 'Did you hear the one about...?')

We learned elsewhere, R. Eliezer said: Repent one day before your death. His disciples asked him, Does then one know on what day he will die? Then all the more reason that he repent today, he replied, lest he die to-morrow, and thus his whole life is spent in repentance. And Solomon too said in his wisdom, Let thy garments be always white; and let not thy head lack ointment. R. Johanan b. Zakkai said: This may be compared to a king who summoned his servants to a banquet without appointing a time. The wise ones adorned themselves and sat at the door of the palace. ['For,'] said they. 'is anything lacking in a royal palace?' The fools went about their work, saying, 'can there be a banquet without preparations?' Suddenly the

king desired [the presence of] his servants: the wise entered adorned, while the fools entered soiled. The king rejoiced at the wise but was angry with the fools. ‘Those who adorned themselves for the banquet,’ ordered he, ‘let them sit, eat and drink. But those who did not adorn themselves for the banquet, let them stand and watch.’ (bShabat 153a)

The invitation of the king in this version crucially does not specify a time, so decisions about getting ready are based on two observations about banquets. Either, ‘everything is already in the palace, we better be ready’ or, ‘we’ll see the necessary stuff for the feast being brought in and we’ll have plenty of time to get dressed’. The standard response to this parable is that it is fair and is certainly less punitive and less definitive than the parable of the ten virgins. The foolish servants are punished but not for all eternity, apparently... except that the context suggests that it is a parable about unexpected death. But what happens with parables and stories is that the context may conjure up a meaning that it doesn’t always have elsewhere.

The focus on suitable dress also brings to mind another parable in which this is an issue: the parable of the wedding feast, also in Matthew (22:1-14). The treatment handed out by the king to the incorrectly dressed guest at the wedding feast is often deemed particularly unfair. Failure to turn up properly dressed feels like the last straw for a king who has had a really hard day, a king who has been ignored when he has told the guests to come for the banquet for his son’s wedding. The invited guests either make transparently feeble excuses or maltreat or kill his servants.

In response to this disrespect, a war starts and finishes, people are annihilated and the city is burnt. As the parable strains reality to the limit, we are beginning to get a sense that this story is not about the everyday, or even a special day, but the most important day indeed, the day of judgement. And a new problem emerges: the king’s house, which is supposed to be filled with guests, is empty.

## Did you ever hear the one about the empty house?

Many might not have noticed the chilling little parable that we find in the traditional material shared by Matthew and Luke.

When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but it finds none. Then it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ When it comes, it finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings along seven other spirits, more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first. (Matt 12:43-45)<sup>1</sup>

One echo of this parable is what happens to an exorcised evil spirit in the account of the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1-20; Matthew 8:28-34; Luke 8:26-39). In that incident, the legion bargain with Jesus that he send them into the herd of pigs. We get a hint of the panic for the demons doomed to wander through waterless regions. Although, paradoxically, where the legion end up is not waterless!

There is a second haunting echo from this parable. This is the demon’s search for a resting place (*anapausis*). It is only in the previous chapter of Matthew that Jesus has invited the weary and burdened to *his* rest.<sup>2</sup> The invitation – ‘come to me’ – that Jesus extends is an invitation to his own place, the sacred space where God is with us.<sup>3</sup>

The third echo comes in the immediately preceding Beelzebul controversy:

Or how can one enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property, without first tying up the strong man? Then indeed the house can be plundered. (Matt 12:29-30)

This parable of the empty house might help in the understanding of what happens to the guest without a wedding garment.

## Did you hear the one about the underdressed guest?

Let us return to the Matthean parable of the wedding feast.

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again 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.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. 'But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then 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.' For many are called, but few are chosen. (Matt 22:2-14)

As already noted, at almost every point in the parable, reality is bent out of shape and the significance is inflated in the direction of the final judgment. Nevertheless there is a progression in the narrative whereby the king realises that his house is empty and must be filled. It is filled with the good and bad alike in Matthew's version after the last set of long-suffering servants gather them in. (In the Lucan version [14:15-24], the slaves are sent out again to find yet more uninvited guests, and the parable ends there.)

In Matthew, the king now comes to look at the guests, finds one not wearing a robe and casts him out. Many readers find this conclusion unfair. After all, good and bad alike are already invited. But there are other ways of looking at it. In fact *looking* is a key word. As the parable

comes to its final scene, the king appears in the banquet hall. But he does not come to welcome and thank his guests, he comes to look at them. And the result is the exclusion of the man. Does this provide us with an answer to that great question in Jesus's ministry: Lord, will only a few be saved? A few that includes me or a few which will certainly exclude me? Lord, will only one be condemned, is that what you are saying? 'In that case, there's a hell of a lot of people worse than me, so I should be OK, and you too. Mind you, I'm not so sure about him.'

What is the significance of this non-wearing of the wedding garment? Nobody had time to get changed. Why is this poor guy picked on?

Could it be that he is not a poor guy at all? Elements in the language of this addition to the parable (which is not in Luke) are expressive of the exorcism stories. Most striking is the Greek word which is rendered as 'he was speechless'. It is the technical term in an exorcism for muzzling (Mark 1:25, 4:39). This figure is also to be bound and cast out, two other expressions associated with exorcism. The triplet of 'muzzled, bound and cast out', therefore, strongly evokes an exorcism: the demon is speechless because he encounters the stronger one.<sup>4</sup> The king's house is no place for the demon looking for a place to inhabit because it is full not empty. But surely this is no ordinary demon, given the way this whole story is inflated towards a picture of the end-time. Is it possible that this is the devil who cannot disguise his evil works and therefore does not wear the wedding garment of goodness? What happens at the end of the parable is close to what is said in Revelation 20:1-3:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and locked and sealed it over him, so that he would deceive the nations no more, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be let out for a little while. (Rev 20:1-3)

There is no way of knowing if Matthew understood the end time in the same way as the Book of Revelation, with an interim imprisonment of

the devil before a final battle. There is a strong sense that the addition to the parable of the underdressed guest is a revelation about the one who, in the words of 1 Peter 5:8, is roaming about looking for whom he might devour. The door is now closed on him and, unlike the foolish virgins, he cannot even utter 'Lord, Lord, open', muzzled as he is.

*Did you hear the one about the sheep and the goats?*

The reason that the hall is supposed to be full in the first place is for the almost forgotten wedding of the son. In fact, the son is an invisible character in this parable. We might recall another parable where the Son is invisible. Did you hear the one about the sheep and the goats? The Son is invisible there to good and bad alike. 'When did we see you?' is the question of both the 'sheep' and the 'goats'. In that parable, which John R Donahue<sup>5</sup> identifies as an uncovering, a revelation about the end, people look and do not see Christ. This parable of the banquet carries its own revelation: the king (perhaps God) looks and does not see Christ. Christ is the wedding garment that the man has not put on; Christ the Son of the King. When did we see you? I don't recognise you because I looked and didn't see you feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and those in prison.

Although Paul and Matthew are unlikely bedfellows, Paul develops the language of putting on Christ and is always urging us to do so. Different pieces of the suit of armour are images for virtues, like faith, hope, love, compassion, endurance. This is what the king is looking for and does not see. We don't go to our wardrobes to find these things to wear. They have to become part of us organically, and the way that we can make them our own is because other people give them to us. We learn to endure from the model of other people who have taught us, we learn to love because other people have loved us, we learn to trust because others have trusted us, we learn to forgive because others have forgiven us as God forgave them. There is an absolute connectedness which makes a space for God's gifts in our lives. A wedding is the perfect metaphor for connectedness. The man without the wedding garment is not connected, he has not allowed himself to receive, he has excluded himself. Perhaps it is fair after all.

*James Crampsey SJ is a member of the Jesuit community in Preston.*

---

<sup>1</sup> The version in Luke is almost word for word the same. The one difference is that Matthew has the word 'empty' which articulates what is implicit in the Lucan version 11:24-26.

<sup>2</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew*, Hermeneia (Fortress, 2001), II.221.

<sup>3</sup> *pausis* is a Greek root meaning 'cessation'. In the New Testament it appears in two variants: *anapausis* and *katapausis*. The latter word is used extensively in the Letter to the Hebrews, where it is the cessation of wandering which the people of God are experiencing in a way analogous to the people of Israel in the Wilderness. This cessation is expressed more positively as the entering of the rest. In Maccabees the day of *katapausis* is the Sabbath, while the cognate verb *katapauerein* is used in the Septuagint for God's resting from his work on the Sabbath. The words and their cognates have ordinary meanings, too, but they are sometimes more charged.

<sup>4</sup> There is also a definitive silence at the end of the temptation narrative in Matthew 4:1-11 when Jesus refuses the invitation to enter the devil's world.

<sup>5</sup> John R. Donahue SJ, 'The "Parable" of the Sheep and the Goats: a challenge to Christian Ethics', *Theological Studies* 47 (1986), 3-31.