

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And so then His Word is fitting and true yesterday, today, and forever. This is wonderfully seen in the parable He speaks in our Gospel reading for today. Its truth rightly described the past. It would prove true once again in the days following Jesus' death and resurrection. And its truth will stand until Jesus returns in glory.

What is this truth? It is two-fold. On the one hand, we can have great comfort, as our Lord does everything to bring us to Him. But on the other hand, we are given a stern warning, that we dare not reject our Lord's invitation, for to do so is to bring certain destruction upon ourselves.

So to the parable. Jesus begins: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son." It's a wonderful occasion, a grand banquet that would be greater than any other feast, because no one in a kingdom would have as much to spend on a banquet, and what greater occasion for feasting than the marriage of the king's own son? The king would hold nothing back, spare no expense, to commemorate the occasion.

The event was significant, not just because it would be a great celebration, but even more so because it was the fulfillment of a promise, the arrival of something long anticipated. The marriage may have been arranged far in advance, or perhaps the king had sent his servants to find a fitting bride for his noble son, or maybe the prince himself had gone on a journey, a quest, if you will, to find his love, and win her heart through heroic deeds.

The Scriptures have marriage pictured in all these ways. However it came about, the day when the king's son and his bride were finally united would have been something looked forward to by everyone in the palace, especially the king himself.

When the day finally arrives, the king sends out his servants to bear the good news. They tell those invited that all is ready. Through the servants, the king declares, "See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast." The king has made all the preparations, sent servants to bring the people back; he even would have provided a beautiful wedding garment for all of his invited guests to wear, that they wouldn't have to worry about the inadequacy of their own attire. Everything was done for them by the king.

And yet what happens? "But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them." Despite the long-awaited event finally happening, and despite the king providing everything for them, they refuse his invitation.

For some, it's just not that important. Other matters are more pressing, such as farms and businesses. Feasts are nice, but they've got to take care of those things that – in their eyes – really matter. Others take an even worse approach. Despite the goodness of the king's invitation, they respond with great wickedness, horribly mistreating the king's own servants, and even putting them to death.

How does the king respond? Jesus says, “The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.” This is no slap on the wrist. For those who had murdered the king’s servants, their judgment reflects their crime as they too are put to the sword, though their deaths are deserved.

For those who had thought that other things were more important than the wedding of the prince, the king takes away those things they thought important. The city, their farms and businesses, all these owed their existence to the king. He was the one who upheld the order in the city, allowing business to take place. He was the one who would drive off bandits, that farmers might work in peace and not have their crops stolen. He was the one who enabled all of it. When the people reject the king’s messengers, and despise his son’s wedding, they have despised the king himself.

And so, in judgment, he takes away all their earthly things, burns their city – which was really his city – to the ground. As Jesus states, “those invited were not worthy,” not because they were unworthy by nature, but by their rejection they had made themselves unworthy.

But the king still desires to share his generosity, his joy, with others. He has the feast already prepared. So what does he do? He commands his servants, “Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.”

Dutifully, the servants go out to the streets and gather in everyone they can find. Whether the people were good or bad, seemingly deserving or undeserving – it didn’t matter. Everyone is brought into the wedding feast, and everyone is given a wedding garment, all clothed by the king in wonderful garments that covered whatever they may have had before being brought into the banquet hall.

Though sadly, even in the banquet hall the attitude of those previously invited is reflected in one man. This guy isn’t wearing a wedding garment. It doesn’t mean he didn’t have one; again, every guest was given one before being brought in. It was provided by the king, paid for by the royal treasury. And you had to wear it to get in.

What that means, then, is that this guy was given this beautiful robe for free, put it on long enough to get in the door, and then tossed it aside. He figured he was good just the way he was. He’ll wear the king’s robe as a means to sneak in, and then once he’s in, he can do whatever he wants, right?

Wrong. The king, inspecting the guests, sees the man and confronts him about his rejection of the king’s gift. The man is speechless; he’s been caught, and there’s nothing he can say that would even be a half-plausible excuse. And so in another example of just judgment, the king has the man thrown out. To reject the king’s gifts, like rejecting the king’s servants and invitation, is to reject the king himself. And so the man is thrown from the presence of the king – the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Before we jump to how this applies to us today, let’s consider how it had already been played out in the history of the people of God. These events took place throughout the Old Testament times. From the day that man fell into sin, God gave the promise of the coming seed of the woman, the Messiah, who would come to save His people from the power of the devil and bring them back into His presence.

Here was the great invitation. God was coming to be Immanuel – God with us – to redeem us from our sins. He would be the prophet like unto Moses, speaking the words of God directly to the people. He would be the new and greater David, bringing the Kingdom that would last forever. He would gather all His people, both Jews and Gentiles, to Mount Zion, and there dwell in their midst, providing a feast of rich food and swallowing up death forever.

Those who repented and feared the Lord would be brought to the wedding feast in heaven, even if they died before the Messiah actually walked the earth. So it is that Abraham saw the day of Christ and was glad, despite the fact that he died roughly two thousand years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

To remind His people of these great promises, the Lord sent His servants, the prophets, to His people. They called the people to remain faithful to the King and trust in His promises, for the day of the Lord was coming very soon.

But, by and large, what did the people do? Many ignored the prophets and despised the word of the Lord. Their concerns were with worldly things, from the kings thinking that they had to pay homage to pagan rulers like those of Egypt and Assyria in order to have security, to the lowly shepherds and farmers who would bring their blemished lambs and spoiled produce to the temple and sell the good stuff for more profit.

Others despised the prophets, mocking them, beating them, even putting them to death. In love, the Lord sent still more prophets to call the people to return to Him, but those prophets were treated worse and worse.

Finally, the Lord's patience reached its end. He sent the armies of Assyria to destroy the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the troops of Babylon to burn the cities of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Thousands died, and thousands were taken away into slavery, never to see the land promised to their fathers again.

They had denied the Lord their God for the sake of worldly interests and powers, and so the Lord gave them over to worldly powers. Even the great temple in Jerusalem was leveled, the people having put their trust in the building rather than in the God who had put His name there.

But God still wanted people to come into His heavenly feast, and so He preserved a remnant of the people of Judah. He raised up faithful people to be examples to His people in exile, such as Daniel and Esther. He continued to send prophets, such as Ezekiel and Malachi. He even brought the exiles back to Jerusalem, defending them as they built a new temple. But still, some rejected his gifts and wanted to walk in their own ways, and as such were expelled from the people, cut off from the promise.

Fast forward roughly five hundred years later, and the scene plays out again. The wedding feast of the Son was even closer, with the King sending His Son to earth to take on flesh and redeem His bride. The Lord again would be the One to do everything to bring the feast about. He would send His Son, who came, not because men were so deserving, but because He loves men so much. He was and is Immanuel, God with us, here to win His bride through His great struggle with the worst enemy of all, death itself.

As this day approaches, the Lord again sent prophets to announce to those invited that the feast was ready. He sent John the Baptist, the last and greatest of the earthly prophets, to proclaim the time had come. He was, as Isaiah had foretold, the voice crying out in the wilderness, to prepare the way of the Lord.

He called many to repent, to turn from their sins that they might be prepared, washed clean, when the Messiah arrived. And once that Messiah did come, John pointed Him out in no uncertain terms: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

Yet for all the glory of the message John was given, what happened to him? Many did repent, but many more, especially the Jewish religious leaders, resisted him. They refused to accept this baptism, even as they couldn't deny its heavenly origin. And finally, John was beheaded by a weak leader who was consumed with the things of the world.

In addition to John, Jesus Himself served as prophet, the supreme Prophet. He spoke the Word of the Lord as the Lord Himself. He called sinners to repentance. He taught about the coming of the Kingdom. He showed forth great signs and wonders, displaying how the power of God was at work in Him. And for a while, He was quite popular.

But then, people began to reject Him for the hard truth He spoke. Rich men went away sad, refusing to give up their wealth to follow Him. Pharisees and lawyers sought to discredit Him at every turn, though they never could refute His teaching. Even many of His disciples left Him at one point, His teaching too much for them to bear.

Finally, one of His closest followers would betray Him to the religious leaders, who would manipulate another weak leader into having Him crucified. As Jesus Himself foretold in His own parable, the Prophet of Prophets, the Servant who came not to be served but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many, was put to death.

Now, Jesus' death was not an accident. It was the plan of God from before man even fell into sin and death. The shedding of His blood was the perfect sacrifice to pay the price for all men's souls. This would be shown when that Suffering Servant was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven, to take up all power and glory at His Father's side. But the wickedness through which He was put to death was still a great sin against the King of Heaven.

And in the days, months, and years after the Lord Jesus ascended, wicked men still put many others to death as well. Steven, the first martyr. James, the son of Zebedee. Many suffered and died through the persecutions of the Jews.

And so again, the Lord's patience came to an end. This time, He brought down the Roman legions upon Jerusalem, and after a siege that saw apocalyptic horrors, the city was leveled. The temple once again was destroyed, with only a wall of its foundation remaining. The Lord's judgment had come.

But still, the Lord desired His banquet hall to be full. Even before Jerusalem's destruction, He had been sending out His servants to call in the Gentiles, and Jews outside of Judea, to come into His

Kingdom, to believe in His Son, to be brought into His household. As people of all nations were baptized into the Triune Name, they were all given that glorious robe of righteousness, paid for by the blood of Jesus, that would grant them entry into the eternal feast.

And yet still, some sought to reject that robe and lean on their own righteousness. Some held that the Old Testament ceremonial laws had to be kept. Some thought that Jews and Gentiles should still remain separate. Some thought that, while the grace of God and the gift of His Son brought them in, it was up to works of their own invention to stay within the Kingdom. Therefore, the judgment of God on such people still remains. As Paul writes in Galatians, “If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed,” thrown into the outer darkness.

We today are now in a third instance of the Lord’s parable being played out. Through the proclamation of the Word, we have been invited to the feast. The pages of Holy Scripture reveal to us all that the Lord has done to bring the feast about. The God who invited all those in ages past is the God who invites us as well.

The Father offered up not just oxen and fattened calves, but His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. The wedding garment of Jesus’ righteousness is still being given out as a free gift through the waters of Holy Baptism. We even have foretastes of the wedding feast miraculously brought to us in Holy Communion.

How then shall we respond? The Bible tells us in 1 Corinthians, “Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.” The examples of Scripture, which are the examples of history, are given to us to be more than mere trivia.

The justice of God, and His judgment on those who ignore Him, who take His grace for granted, or who openly despise Him is the same today as it always has been. His patience is beyond words, but the time of grace will come to an end.

Therefore, do not despise His Word, looking instead to farms and businesses, to the concerns of this world, for like the cities in the parable, the day is coming when all of it shall be burned up.

Do not take the righteousness of Christ for granted, thinking that because you made it through the door, you can take off the wedding garment and live as you please, for sadly many who identified as Christians in this life will find themselves bound hand and foot and casting into the outer darkness, to an eternity of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Rather, rejoice in your Lord’s invitation, and treasure the gift of righteousness that He has given to you, that you may with all the faithful share in the unending joy of your Lord.

In the name of Jesus, amen.