

Matthew 22 1-14
A Sermon by Rev Carol Harley for Sunday 11.10.20

May I speak to you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

People have parties for all sorts of reasons. In this age of binge drinking some of it seems to be just to escape from the painful realities of life. But parties can celebrate significant events: Birthdays, weddings, retirements, and even funerals. Sometimes parties just have a value in themselves. They bring people together in many ways. People who haven't met for some time come together and renew friendships. We are able to thank people for what they have done or mean to us. They are events, which can create community or, if they go wrong, can destroy it.

Well, imagine the scene, an invitation to a formal dinner- party arrives at your home. Panic sets in as the person it is intended for rushes upstairs. Drawers are dragged open, then slammed shut. The same happens with wardrobe doors. After what seems like hours you go up to see what all the noise is about and also to ask if you can help and we are met with a whole mound of clothes flung everywhere including pants and socks thrown in the bookcase and a dangerously bulging wardrobe door bursting at the seams, and your family member lets out a sort of strangled cry of anguish and despair then announces, 'I'VE GOT NOTHING TO WEAR.'

Is that a problem that affects many people these days when preparing to come to church? Gone, I think, are the days of turning up in your Sunday best. Yet week by week through the notices, posters, or website invitations to worship nearly always ends with, 'All are Welcome'. Do people give much thought about what to wear to church, or do we take some advice from Ch 6:vv28&29 in Matthew's Gospel:

'And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they don't toil or spin; yet I tell you, even SOLOMON in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.'

So – What is the dress code for heaven? This parable about the wedding clothes is one of the most troubling in Matthew's Gospel. Luke's version is easier, and tries to make fewer points. Matthew's version feels uncomfortable to read, and ends with an outer darkness, and weeping and gnashing of teeth, ending with the words '*many are called but few are chosen.*'

This parable has an uncomfortable amount of violence in it. The killing of the king's servants and the retribution of the king who has the murderers killed and their city burned. The other uncomfortable aspect is the fate of the guest who turns up to the party with the wrong clothes, the guest arrives at the wedding feast without his wedding clothes, and is bound up and thrown outside.

However, this isn't a parable about wearing the correct clothing for a wedding. Look more closely and we can see that it's to do with what people make of the invitation God offers, and how they respond. It's a story about consequences to actions, and the difficulties this can create in the area of faith. Jesus points this out when he tells us to think carefully about the dress code of heaven.

Jesus' message was given to the people in Jerusalem who thought they already knew all about being religious and there was nothing more for them to do or learn in what they believed and how they witnessed to that belief. Jesus had come preaching his Kingdom message, but the temple-goers had heard it all before – or so they thought. They'd paid their dues, they weren't particularly opposed to

what Jesus had to say, but they had other priorities which needed their attention. When Jesus called, they didn't respond. So others were called to the feast. Matthew says that they were gathered from all over, the good and the bad so that the wedding hall was filled.

But what about the man with the wrong clothes? Here is the point that Jesus is making. The clothes stand for Kingdom values. The clothes stand for the Christian life. The image of clothing is used in other parts of the New Testament, Colossians, Ephesians and Galatians, where the metaphor refers to outward evidence of the inward transformation when a person is joined to Christ.

Hearing the invitation is not enough, going through the motions of religious behaviour is not enough. What matters to Matthew, and surely what matters ultimately to Jesus, is if you receive the love and grace of Jesus, and don't respond with a Christian lifestyle which means humility, compassion, kindness and gratitude, then to what extent can it be said that you are really following the Lord? To what extent can it be said of you that you are 'dressed for the Kingdom party?'

The point of the story is that Jesus is telling the truth, the truth that political and religious leaders often like to hide: the truth that God's Kingdom in which love and truth and mercy and holiness reign. They are the clothes you need to wear for the wedding. And if you refuse to put them on, you are saying that you don't want to stay at the party.

Seen in this light, how many of our churches practice this kind of testimony demanded by the kind of party in the Kingdom of God? How many individual Christians within our churches share the warmth and kindness and joyfulness that are what the Good News is all about, and share this with the people who come in to our churches?

The message for us here is that the wedding invitation has gone out. The question is not whether we can manage to fit this party in to your schedule. This is the invitation that changes your schedule – and your life. The time will come when we will be face to face with our host. Who will look to see what we are wearing, and how that reflects how closely we have attempted to follow Christ. If we accept the invitation to his party, we can't refuse to conform our lives to his gospel.

Heaven's dress-code is not about Versace or Gucci or Prada or the latest and most expensive clothing all colour co-ordinated with matching accessories. The dress-code of heaven is about what we are like, on the inside and the outside; what we do; what we believe; what we say; who we are.

Call the clothes love and justice, truth and mercy, inclusion and equality. That is what the Lord calls us to wear to his heavenly party. How many of our churches are filled with inappropriately dressed people – not wearing the wrong clothes – but wearing the wrong attitudes to what Jesus calls them to be and to do?

The Bible talks a lot about clothing – the leaves and a coat of many colours; a seamless robe; the armour of God and those dressed in white. But the dress-code for the party in heaven is not made out of material or fashion. It is the attitude and action of heart and mind and soul.

Accept the invitation, but dress with care!!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.