

Historic Commentary

(19th Sunday after Pentecost - Year A)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Matthew 22:1-14 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Matthew 22](#), from a 13th century document called the *Catena Aurea* that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

[Gregory the Great](#): First we must ask whether this lesson in Matthew is what Luke describes as a dinner, since some details appear inconsistent. Here it is a midday meal, there a dinner; here the one who came to the marriage feast improperly dressed was cast out, and there none of those said to have entered is shown to have been cast out. From Matthew we can infer that in this passage the marriage feast represents the church of the present time, and the dinner in Luke represents the final and eternal banquet. Some who enter the one will leave it, but no one who has once entered the other will later go out. But if anyone argues that it is the same lesson, I think it better to save the faith and yield to another's interpretation than to give in to strife. Perhaps we can reasonably take it that Luke kept silent about the man Matthew said came without a marriage garment and was thrown out. That one called it a dinner and the other a midday meal does not stand in the way of my interpretation, because when the ancients took their daily midday meal at the ninth hour it was also called a dinner ... A clearer and safer thing to say is that the Father made a marriage feast for his Son by joining the church to him through the mystery of his incarnation. The womb of the Virgin who bore him was the bridal chamber of this bridegroom, and so the psalmist says, "He has set his tent in the sun, and he is like a bridegroom coming forth from his bridal chamber." He truly came forth like a bridegroom from his bridal chamber who, as God incarnate, left the inviolate womb of the Virgin to unite the church to himself.

And so he sent his servants to invite his friends to the marriage feast. He sent once, and he sent again, because first he made the prophets and later the apostles preachers of the

Lord's incarnation. He sent his servants twice with the invitation, because he said through the prophets that his only Son's incarnation would come about, and he proclaimed through the apostles that it had. Because those who were first invited to the marriage banquet refused to come, he said in his second invitation, "See, I have prepared my meal; my oxen and fattened animals have been slain, and everything is ready." What do we take the oxen and fattened animals to be but the fathers of the Old and New Testaments?

Augustine: All the faithful know the story of the marriage of the king's son, and his feast. They know that the Lord's table is open to all who are willing correctly to receive it. But it is important that each one examines how he approaches, even when he is not forbidden to approach. The holy Scriptures teach us that there are two feasts of the Lord: one to which the good and evil come, the other to which the evil do not come.⁵ So then the feast of which we have just now heard when the gospel was being read has both good and evil guests. All who excused themselves from this feast are evil, but not all those who entered in are good. I now address you, therefore, who are the good guests at this feast. You are taking careful note of the words "For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself." It is to you I speak. I plead with you not to look vainly for the good apart from the church but to bear with the evil within.

Gregory the Great: But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business. To go to your farm is to involve yourself excessively in earthly toil. To go to your business is to long for the gain brought by our worldly activity. One person is concerned with earthly toil, another devoted to the business of this world. Neither takes notice of the mystery of the Lord's incarnation. They are unwilling to live in accordance with it. As if they are proceeding to their farm or business, they refuse to come to the marriage feast of the king. Frequently, and this is a more serious matter, some not only decline the gift of the one calling them but even persecute those who accept it. And so he adds, "The rest seized his servants, and, having insulted them, killed them. But the king, learning of this, sent his armies, destroyed those murderers and set fire to their city." He destroys the murderers because he has slain the persecutors; he sets fire to their city because not only their souls but even their bodies are tormented by the eternal flames of hell....

But the one who sees himself despised when he issues the invitations will not have the marriage feast of his son the king empty. He sends for others, because although God's

word is in danger from some, it will find a place to come to rest. Then he said to his servants, “The marriage feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the byroads, and call to the marriage feast everyone you find.” If we take the roads in holy Scripture to mean our actions, we interpret the byroads as our failed actions. Often it is those who meet no prosperity in their earthly actions who come readily to God.

And his servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, bad and good, and the marriage feast was filled with guests. The character of those at the banquet reveals clearly that the king’s marriage feast represents the church of this time, in which the bad are present along with the good. The church is a thorough mix of various offspring. It brings them all to the faith but does not lead them all to the liberty of spiritual grace successfully by changes in their lives, since their sins prevent it. As long as we are living in this world we have to proceed along the road of the present age thoroughly mixed together. We shall be separated when we reach our goal. Only the good are in heaven, and only the bad are in hell. This life is situated between heaven and hell. It goes on in the middle, so to speak, and takes in the citizens of both parts. The church admits them now without distinguishing them but separates them later when they leave this life.

Augustine: But someone will object, This is strange. What great matter is it that one man among this large crowd does not have a wedding garment? Why rivet attention on this one man? So what if he creeps in unperceived by the servants of the householder? How could it be said that because of just that one, “they invited in both good and bad together”? Attend therefore, beloved, and understand. This man represents a whole class of persons of whom there are many.

Gregory the Great: But since you have already come into the house of the marriage feast, our holy church, as a result of God’s generosity, be careful, my friends, lest when the King enters he find fault with some aspect of your heart’s clothing. We must consider what comes next with great fear in our hearts. But the king came in to look at the guests and saw there a person not clothed in a wedding garment. What do we think is meant by the wedding garment, dearly beloved? For if we say it is baptism or faith, is there anyone who has entered this marriage feast without them? A person is outside because he has not yet come to believe. What then must we understand by the wedding garment but love? That person enters the marriage feast, but without wearing a wedding garment, who is present

in the holy church. He may have faith, but he does not have love. We are correct when we say that love is the wedding garment because this is what our Creator himself possessed when he came to the marriage feast to join the church to himself. Only God's love brought it about that his only begotten Son united the hearts of his chosen to himself. John says that "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son for us."

Augustine: Note that "the master of the house came in to look at the guests." See, my beloved, the servants' business was only to invite and bring in the good and bad. It is not said that the servants took notice of the guests, found among them a man who had no wedding garment and spoke to him. This is not written. The master of the house came in, the master saw him, the master of the house inspected, the master of the house hauled him off and threw him out. It is not fitting to pass over this quickly. But I have undertaken to establish another point, how that one man stands for many. "But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment; and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless." For the one who questioned him was one to whom he could give no deceptive reply

Augustine: The garment that is required is in the heart, not on the body, for if it had been put on externally, it could not have been concealed even from the servants. But what is the wedding garment that must be put on? We learn it from these words, "May your priests be clothed with righteousness." It is of that garment of righteousness that the apostle speaks when he says, "Because when we are clothed, we are not found naked." In this way the unprepared man was discovered by the Lord of the feast, interrogated, bound and thrown out, one from among the many.

Augustine: What is that wedding garment, then? This is the wedding garment: "The goal of this command is charity," says the apostle, "which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." This is the wedding garment. Not charity of any kind whatever—for very often they who are partakers together of an evil conscience seem to love one another. Those who commit robberies together, who love the destructive arts of witchcraft, and who go to the coliseum together and join together in the shout of the chariot race or the wild beast fight—these too in some sense very often may be said to love one another. But in these is no charity from a pure heart, a good conscience and a faith unfeigned. The wedding garment is charity such as this: "Though I speak with the

tongues of men and of angels and have not charity, I have become like a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.” Suppose someone who speaks in tongues comes in and is asked, “How did you get in here without a wedding garment?” Suppose he answers, “But I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains.” But if he has no charity, he has nothing. Such may be the clothing of those who in fact lack the wedding garment. “Though,” he says, “I have all these and have not Christ, I am nothing.” Is then “the gift of prophecy” nothing? Is then “the knowledge of mysteries” nothing? It is not that these are nothing. But “I, if I have them, and have not charity, am nothing.”

John Calvin: *Vs 4. Again he sent other servants.*

He speaks as if it had been the same persons who were invited, for it was one body of the people. The meaning is, that when the happy and joyful day of redemption drew near, they were warned to be ready; for they had been long ago informed as to the time. But now Christ told them that, at the very hour, fresh messengers were sent to entreat them to come with haste; for the first invitation which he mentions includes all the former prophecies, down to the publication of the Gospel. For a long period, they exercised cruelty on the prophets; but their fury grew as the time advanced, and at length spent all its force on Christ and the apostles. For this reason, he charges the ancient people with nothing more than contempt and pride, but says, that the servants who had been last sent, and who arrived at the hour of supper, were abused or slain. That people arrived at the highest pitch of their crimes, when their haughty rejection of his grace was followed by the madness of cruelty. And yet he does not charge all of them equally with crime; for even at the latest call, which was given by the Gospel, the grace of God was in part ridiculed by careless despisers, and in part was furiously rejected by hypocrites. And thus it usually happens, that ungodly men break out into fiercer rage against God, in proportion to the earnestness with which he invites them to salvation.

We must now consider that part of doctrine which is conveyed both by Matthew and by Luke. One went to his field, and another to his merchandise; or, as Luke expresses it, one pleaded that he had married a wife; another that he had purchased a field; and another that he had bought five yoke of oxen. By these words Christ pronounces the Jews to have been so entirely devoted to the world and to earthly things, that no man found leisure to approach to God; for the cares of this world, when we become entangled by them, are so many impediments in our way to keep us back from the kingdom of God. It is truly base

and shameful, that men who were created for a heavenly life, should be under the influence of such brutish stupidity, as to be entirely carried away after transitory things. But this disease is universally prevalent; so that hardly one person in a hundred can be found, who prefers the kingdom of God to fading riches, or to any other kind of advantages. Though all are not infected with the same disease, every man is led away by his desires; in consequence of which, all are wandering in various directions.

Besides, it deserves our attention, that ungodly men hold out fair pretences for rejecting the grace of God; as if their indolence might be excused, because they are entirely occupied with the affairs of the present life, and care little about a heavenly inheritance. But we see how Christ takes from us all such excuses, that no man may imagine it to be of any advantage for him to plead that he is detained by engagements of an earthly nature. On the contrary, men commit a double fault, when they allow themselves to be retarded by those things which are in themselves lawful, and which ought rather to have aided their progress. For why does God allow us the conveniences of the present life, but in order to draw us to himself? And yet so far is it from being true, that all have earnest desires towards heaven, in proportion as they are assisted by acts of the Divine kindness, that even holy marriage, and fields, and other riches, are so many snares to bind every man more closely to the earth.

Vs 7. But when the king heard it.

This punishment is mentioned by Matthew alone; for Luke makes no mention of any outrage committed on the servants. Both concur in stating, that those who did not come at the appointed time were shut out, and deprived of the honor of being present at the banquet. But this doctrine applies equally to us; for the same destruction which Christ denounces against the Jews awaits all the ungodly, who violently oppose the ministers of the Gospel. Those who are so entirely occupied with earthly cares, as to set no value on the divine invitation, will at length perish miserably in famine and want; and therefore, whenever God calls us, let us be prepared and ready to follow.

Vs 9. Go therefore to the highways.

Having shown that they are unworthy of the grace of God who disdainfully reject it when offered to them, he now says that their place is supplied by others, by the mean and despised common people. And here is described the calling of the Gentiles, which is to excite the Jews to jealousy, as we have it in the Song of Moses; "They have provoked me

by those who are not gods, and I will provoke them by that which is not a people, and by a foolish nation will I enrage them,” (Deuteronomy 32:21.)

Having been first elected, they imagined that the grace of God was bound to them, as if God could not want them; and how haughtily they despised all others is well known. Thus by way of admission, he compares the Gentiles to the poor, the blind, and the lame. He says that they are called from the cross-roads, and from the streets, as strangers and unknown persons; but yet declares that they will occupy that place which friends and domestics had treated with indifference. What the prophets had obscurely foretold about creating a new church is now plainly expressed. This dishonor was the completion of the divine vengeance on the Jews, when God cut them off, and ingrafted wild branches into the stock of the olive-tree, (Romans 11:17;) when he threw them off, and received the polluted and filthy Gentiles into his house. But if at that time he spared not the natural branches, (Romans 11:21,) the same punishment will this day be inflicted on us, if we do not answer to his call. The supper which had been prepared for us will not be lost, but God will invite other guests.

Matthew 22:11. And the king, having come in to see the guests.

Here Christ does not reproach the Jews with having wickedly despised the grace and calling of God; but gives early warning to those who would be placed in their room, not to pollute with their filth the holy marriage, when God shall bestow upon them admission to his table. Hitherto he has taught that the Jews, on account of their ungodly and disdainful conduct, would be deprived of the peculiar honor and privilege which they had enjoyed; and that from among the irreligious and abhorred Gentiles would men be called to occupy their place. But now he threatens that, out of this very number, those who bring reproach upon the Church will be expelled; for God invites all indiscriminately by the Gospel, and thus many unholy and abominable persons creep in, who, though for a time they are admitted along with others, yet, when God reviews the guests, will be thrown out and dragged to punishment. The general truth conveyed is, that not all who have once entered the Church will become partakers of everlasting life, but only those who are found to wear the dress which befits the heavenly palace.

As to the wedding garment, is it faith, or is it a holy life? This is a useless controversy; for faith cannot be separated from good works, nor do good works proceed from any other source than from faith. But Christ intended only to state, that the Lord calls us on the express condition of our being renewed by the Spirit after his image; and that, in order to

our remaining permanently in his house, we must put off the old man with his pollutions, (Colossians 3:9; Ephesians 4:22,) and lead a new life, that the garment may correspond to so honorable a calling. But a question arises, how comes it that a beggar is punished so severely for not bringing a wedding garment; as if it were unusual to see the wretched people, who beg their bread on the public roads, wearing tattered and ugly clothes? I reply, the question is not as to the manner in which the garment is to be procured; for whomsoever the Lord invites he at the same time supplies with clothing, and in all of us is fulfilled what Ezekiel says, (16:6-14,) that God finds nothing in us but wretchedness, and nakedness, and abominable filth, but adorns us with magnificent attire. We know also, that there is no other way in which we are formed anew after the image of God, but by putting on Christ, (Romans 13:14; Galatians 3:27.) It is not, therefore, the declaration of Christ, that the sentence of casting them into outer darkness will be executed on wretched men who did not bring a costly garment taken from their own wardrobe, but on those who shall be found in their pollution, when God shall come to make a scrutiny of his guests.

Vs 14. For many are called, but few are chosen.

The object of the parable is pointed out by the conclusion, that few are chosen, though many are called; from which we infer, that we ought not to attempt an ingenious explanation of every minute clause. But lately, Christ did not threaten that the greater part would be thrown out, but mentioned one man only; and now we learn from him, that out of a large number few will be retained. And certainly, though in the present day a more numerous body of men is collected into the Church by the Gospel than was formerly collected by the Law, it is but a small portion of them whose faith is evinced by newness of life. Let us not flatter ourselves with the empty title of faith, but let every man seriously examine himself, that at the final review he may be pronounced to be one of the lawful guests; for, as Paul reminds us, that the vessels in the Lord's house are not all of the same kind, so let every one that calleth on the name of the Lord depart from iniquity, (2 Timothy 2:19,20.) I enter no farther, at present, into the question about the eternal election of God; for the words of Christ mean nothing more than this, that the external profession of faith is not a sufficient proof that God will acknowledge as his people all who appear to have accepted of his invitation.

