

Many are called, but few are chosen

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Pentecost + 19 A – Exodus 32 1-14 Matthew 22 1-14

Was there a sign outside that wedding venue? *Dress code. If ladies present, thongs, stubbies and dark blue singlets prohibited!* Was it that sort of offence? Is choice of clothing so important that the heavenly bouncer, having roughed you up, then throws you into the outer darkness to weep and gnash your remaining teeth? I doubt it.

This is another in a series of parables where Jesus challenges some who believe they're called and chosen to be the leaders of the chosen people. Jesus ends this parable with an unnerving warning: '*many are called, but few are chosen*'. Stung, these indignant *chosen* leaders will plot to trap Jesus.

A scary message of this parable is that there's no guarantee you're on the inside. Being on the invitation-list, being an insider – think of being a baptised or ordained member of the church today – neither qualification is a guarantee that you're in – that you end up being *chosen*.

What about the *chosen* people; the called and chosen people – Israel? Over the past months, the lectionary has followed some central events of their call and choosing. The story of the Exodus records their rescue from slavery in the land of Egypt, and their journey towards the Promised Land. We've often been up close, like today, wincing at their rocky relationship with the God who rescued them. The people of Israel in the wilderness behave like the invited guests in today's parable who violated the invitation so dreadfully. They were God's invited guests – called out of slavery, led through the waters of the Red Sea to journey to a Promised Land, where they were

to be blessed with freedom, justice, trust, wholeness and mutual respect; they were called to be a beacon of hope to the world.

To be the ones chosen for such a destiny was a staggering honour – called to robe yourselves in a rich garment of privilege that slaves could never have dreamt of. How do you begin to respond to such grace? This morning, sadly, we see how they do. As they wait for Moses to come back down from Mount Sinai, we watch them lose patience; lose trust. They decide to cover all bases and worship another god, just in case – an image of a golden calf which they make for themselves.

That's what our parable depicts; people who only honour an invitation if they feel like it, who aren't really committed – who don't put on the garment – who publicly insult the King and his Son. The honour of the invitation is unimaginable; impossible to reciprocate. Yet they turn it down and even abuse and kill the bearers of the invitation.

In their place, strangers and foreigners are asked along, regardless; good or bad. This parable drives home the point that it's not necessarily the people you'd *expect* to know God who actually do. God is more broad-minded than we can imagine, inviting ... well... anyone ... into the kingdom. That's what makes Church so exciting; random; edgy – that's something we call a foretaste of the heavenly banquet – the unpredictable, wonderful variety of the community God calls; God chooses – not whom we might have thought of at all.

Amidst all this, what's this wedding garment about? *The king noticed one hastily recruited guest who hadn't put on a wedding garment.* We're clear that it's an insult – not putting on the garment. But what is this wedding garment – what does it mean?

Over the centuries, people in the Church have come up with a

fascinating range of possibilities. Very early on, Tertullian ^{160-225 CE} said it was a garment of good works and self-denial. Later, Hilary of Poitiers ^{315-367 CE} said the garment was the Holy Spirit. Augustine ^{354-430 CE} had two goes; first that it was a garment of love, and then later, that the garment was the Christ himself, whom we put on at our baptism. The Reformation preachers said that the garment was faith; faith that was active – so it was something you could see expressed in love and good works. Catholics of that time agreed about it representing faith, but the faith they meant was shown by the guests accepting the invitation to the feast; not by the garment. For them, it was clearly a symbol of good works.

In the 18th century, a teaching surfaced that said wedding garments were given to guests by their hosts in that time. As you can imagine, this fitted very well into protestant teaching about faith as a gift from God; not a human work. That's how it's been preached in protestant circles now for over two centuries. Luz Matthäus III: 246-9

I think it was probably preached this way because people felt a need to explain why the king could deal so severely with a guest whose only offence was not to wear a wedding garment. And that severity is certainly an issue.

But this teaching about God giving the garment sidesteps what all the other interpreters of the wedding garment were trying to address, which is what the garment says about our true relationship with God. Whatever else they say, they agree that this wedding garment means that something about us really matters to God, and secondly, that putting this garment is to accept the invitation to belong to God; it is to receive a new identity as one of God's community. Matthew put things in a pretty scary way – with the murderers and their punishment, and the gnashing of teeth in the outer darkness. Maybe their community needed a bit of a kick-start at the time: this is,

of course, told to shape a community, not individuals. So what might this parable say specifically to us? Does our community wear this wedding garment?

By wearing this robe, our community can honour God and his Son. Wearing this robe, we can radiate the joy and expectation of a wedding banquet. Wearing this robe, we can be a beacon of hope in the world. Wearing this robe proclaims that God is changing us; that we're a work in progress. As one American Catholic scholar put it, today's *'Gospel is not the announcement that [we are] fine the way we are. Rather, [that] God loves us so much that he will not leave us unchanged.'*

Leonard R. Klein

We're called to open ourselves to that grace; to stay open to it so we can be changed and go on being changed; to grow, which is to live. We're called to put on the garment to signify to the world and to each other our true identity as a community of Christ. Amen.