

It is hard to imagine that anyone receiving an invitation to a royal wedding would refuse to go. When Prince William married Catherine Middleton in 2011 guests naturally included their own families, members of other royal families, religious and political leaders; but, breaking with precedent, half the guests were friends from their childhood and university days, as well as representatives of charities they supported, celebrities and some people who would never have expected an invitation. As everyone present at dinner was deemed “equally important” to the couple, the tables were a mix of royals, family members and friends.

Only fifteen of the two thousand invitees declined, most of them through ill health. The Crown Prince and Princess of Japan could not come because their country had been hit by earthquake and tsunami. And the Prince of Liechtenstein was attending the beatification of Pope John Paul II, which clashed with the wedding.

In today’s Gospel Jesus presents a strange story about a royal wedding. Servants delivered personal invitations to the wedding of a king’s son, but no one turned up. When the banquet was ready the king sent more servants to tell them to come. But they made limp excuses, beat up the servants and killed them. Then the story becomes really bizarre. The furious king despatched troops to burn down the town where these murderers lived. After that, by which time the food on the table must have been stone cold, he sent another lot of servants out into the streets to fetch anyone at all, good and bad alike, until the hall was filled with guests.

The theme is the familiar one of the failure of God’s chosen people to respond to what God expected of them, and their replacement by others who did. It is a peculiar story, but those who first heard it would know some things we may not. They would know that the first servants sent out were the prophets Moses, Elijah, Elisha and others, whose message was ignored. The second lot of servants were more prophets, like Isaiah, who, in the first reading, talked about God preparing a banquet of rich food and fine wines for all people. The prophets made heartfelt appeals for men and women to repent and accept God’s invitation to enter the kingdom of God, but they were scorned, ill-treated, and some of them were killed. The sending of the troops to burn up the city while the food was on the table refers to the tragedy of AD70; the

destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans and the massacre of its inhabitants, which Jesus warned would happen because of their rejection of God's kingdom. The first readers of St Matthew's Gospel which was written only a few years after the event would have vivid memories of it.

After that, the servants went out along the roads and invited anyone they could find, good and bad alike; people who would never have expected an invitation. These Gentiles responded to their invitation with joy, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

These last servants who travelled the roads to bring in guests were the apostles and missionaries of the Church. The king told his servants to "go", the same word used later in Matthew's Gospel when Jesus tells the apostles to "go" and make disciples of all nations. They travelled beyond Jerusalem into Gentile lands, to Europe, Asia, Africa and eventually the Americas and Australia. And they are still going out, these missionaries, priests, religious and lay people, suffering hardships, as Paul, in the second reading, told us he did, inviting men and women into the kingdom of God. And all of us in different ways are part of that mission of spreading the Gospel. I think that's why I am so pleased by our shared parish commitment to the indigenous Australian and the East Timor mission – a constant reminder to us that the Gospel is to be shared way beyond our own narrow confines. As Christians we are, by definition, a people who evangelise – people who witness to Gospel love as we share our material goods.

The beauty of this parable is that it presents the kingdom of God as a wedding banquet, highly desirable and attractive. Moreover, the Lord freely invites us to be his guests. We do not have to be worthy; we could never be worthy of God's invitation. God invites both the good and the bad. God wants us all to be there.

But hang on! Why was one unfortunate bloke thrown out for not wearing a wedding garment? At baptism a white garment is put on. We are clothed in Christ. It is a salutary reminder that we are called to grow into the likeness of the Christ we have put on, and live the Gospel life. Having accepted the invitation, that is God's expectation of his people. Seems that there is no such thing as a free meal!