

The gist of this parable, according to most interpreters, is that human beings are so oblivious to God's grace that Matthew had to exaggerate the consequences of ignoring such an invitation. To get our attention, he had to make the king murderous when he was rejected, and merciless to the one guest who showed up without a wedding robe. It's a more severe version of Luke's parable, in which the emphasis is on how inclusive the host of the feast is, and how he disregards class or deserts in his gracious invitation. But I find it really hard to gloss over the extremes of behavior in Matthew's version. To the invited guests who had refused the invitation (some of whom actually RSVPd by killing the slaves bearing the invitation), the king sends troops, kills the would-be guests, and burns their city. His servants then bring in random people off the street, who I imagine were too terrified to turn down the invitation. But one such guest doesn't have a wedding robe, so the king ties him hand and foot and throws him into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. That is just psychotic.

So it was an enormous relief to me to find that a new interpretation has been emerging. At least it's new to me. And the more I live with it, the more persuasive I find it. So I'm just going to lay it out here and see what you all think.

Jesus has come to Jerusalem. He has entered triumphantly and been hailed as a liberator. By some people. Now he's teaching at the Temple, and this is one of the stories he tells. He begins it, "The kingdom of heaven *may be compared to* a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son." The force of the Greek grammar, I am told, is "The kingdom of the heavens has been likened to..." which could be a set-up for a **wrong** way of thinking about God's reign that needs correction. In contrast, the

parable in 20:1 of the laborers in the field begins, “For the kingdom of the heavens is like.” That is quite different from how this parable begins.

<http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/10/the-kingdom-of-heavens-v-kingdom-of.html>

The kingdom of heavens *has been likened to* this awful nightmarish episode. What kind of king is this? Maybe the one who has aggrandized himself and sought to gain respect by remodeling the Temple Again, an intensive examination of the Greek suggests that Jesus begins this parable with, “People often describe the kingdom of heaven as if God were like Herod.” And who, in the vicinity of the Herod-built Temple where Jesus is teaching, might describe the kingdom of heaven as if God were Herod?” Mmm, maybe the chief priests and scribes?

The guests refuse to come, and they don’t give reasons. But this is the wedding of the king’s son, so it’s not a social event but a political event. To refuse is not a social gaffe but a boycott, an act of rebellion. *That* would explain the murderous response. Indeed, one of the commentators noted: “(PREACHERS: Do not, by any means, make a parallel between the man king’s statement of worthiness here and the recent event when a President invited a championship basketball team to the White House and they refused because of their dislike for the President and then the President tweeting that they were not invited and weren’t worthy of coming anyway. Do not do it. Don’t even think about it. Where would you even get such an idea?)”

The forcible invitation of the B list guests (not invited but “gathered”) then looks not so much like generous hospitality but like face-saving, the host ensuring

that his party is well-attended. If he can't be popular, he can at least simulate popularity.

Now, this is a little nerdy, but we're kind of nerdy here, so I think you'll like this. From the very beginning of Matthew's gospel, the chief priests and scribes have not represented a particular theological stance. They've represented the power structure of Herod and the Temple. So remember in Matthew's birth narrative, when Herod hears that magi asking for "the child who has been born king of the Jews," Matthew says that he was frightened "and all of Jerusalem with him." Then, he called "the chief priests and scribes" to inquire into where the child is to be born. When the king's instructions to report back on the child were ignored and his desires frustrated, he ordered an incredible orgy of violence. From the very beginning of Matthew, these 'religious' leaders are not just religious leaders. They are identified with the Herodian dynasty, both Herod the father in the birth narrative and Herod the son in the adult stories of Jesus. This parable is not about what the kingdom of God is like; this parable is about the way the religious authorities represent the kingdom of God to be. They say it's like the kingdom of Herod, and that God is like Herod—vindictive, violent, and untrustworthy.

Now, what of the unfortunate guest who didn't dress for the occasion? The king said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe? And *he was speechless.*' It is generally understood that the *he* that is speechless is the unrobed man. The context appears to be making clear that the answer the unrobed man gave to the question was "speechlessness."¹ Matthew is always reaching back into the Hebrew Bible for foreshadowings of Jesus, and Isaiah contains several

references to a mysterious figure called the Suffering Servant. Isaiah emphasizes that the Servant is speechless: "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth" (53:7) is but one example of several that could be quoted. All describe the situation and the behavior of the man who becomes the king's victim in the parable. (Aiken)

Aiken writes, "If the man without a wedding garment is in fact a reference to the suffering servant, then the suffering servant has put us in a position to understand the answer Jesus gave to the chief priests and elders. [In Chapter 21, they had asked by what authority Jesus was doing these things.] The answer, probably different from any answer they had conceived of, was the authority of the suffering servant. The priests, and a great many others, expected Jesus to lead a revolution. Jesus now tells them that instead of a revolution he will take onto himself the violence that already rules their lives."

"The religious authorities had also asked, "Who gave you this authority?" The answer is one of the great insights and one of the great ironies of the gospel. The answer is, you did, and you are, "by virtue of" the persistence of the violence you have practiced "since the foundation of the world" and which you intend for me, Jesus, now. The suffering servant receives his authority by taking onto himself the violence, the sins, and the suffering of others. He is called into being by a broken world." (Aiken)

Jesus has two audiences as he teaches: the chief priests and scribes, who represent the ruling powers and are ready to seize him and kill him; and the crowds who hope that Jesus will seize and kill the ruling powers. Well, and he has a third

audience, the disciples, who find themselves in the middle of this potentially violent vortex, and who know him best. Will they succumb to violence, and continue the cycle? Or will they finally understand, when Jesus absorbs violence and does not pass it back or pass it on, that that is how we find the entryway into the kingdom of heaven?

Gracious God, as Jesus suffered wordlessly in order to refute the efficacy of violence, may we have confidence in your power to transform and redeem without rejecting anyone. May we carry with us the gracious presence of our Teacher and Savior, that where we go, there is new hope and a foretaste of your kingdom. Amen.

ⁱ ["The Kingdom of Heaven Suffers Violence: Discerning the Suffering Servant in the Parable of the Wedding Banquet,"](#) W. Martin Aiken, 2003. At Paul Nuechterlein's *Girardian Reflections on the Lectionary*. (.doc file)