Trinity 19A 11/10/26

Today, Jesus tells a story about guests but these guests are guests in the Kingdom of God. To understand the story, it helps to know that the early church had a discipline problem on their hands. No doubt St Matthew reflected on these words of Jesus for some turned up to God's table with no sense of what it meant to be there. As far as they were concerned, it was a come-as-you-are party, because Jesus had squared everything with God. So then everyone was welcome and nothing was required: no dressy clothing, no special table manners, no RSVP. Wrong! Totally wrong, according to St Matthew. Being an invited guest to the kingdom party does not mean you may do as you please. Even being invited at the last minute does not mean anything goes. St Matthew in effect says, "People, you have been invited to feast with the king. Now, rise to the occasion and be the king's people!"

Like everything else in the story, the wedding robe has a deeper meaning. It is not a white linen tunic embroidered with gold thread. It is a whole way of life — one that honours the king, one that recognises the privilege of being called into his presence, even if the invitation arrives at the last minute. The underdressed guest's mistake was not that he turned up in shorts and sandals. It was that he turned up too full of himself and thought no one would notice, least of all the king.

On the one hand, this is a story addressing a particular situation in the life of the early church and no longer has anything to do with us. On the other hand, it happens every Sunday right here. This divine service may not be the heavenly wedding banquet, but it is certainly the rehearsal dinner, where each of us gets to practice our parts. Everyone was invited to be here this morning but as you can see, some of us had other more important things to do. Some are on the golf course. Some are playing sport. Some are reading the Age in coffee shops. Some are at work out of necessity. Some are still in bed. But we are here, and not necessarily because we are better than they are. Like the underdressed guest, some of us have rolled in here without thinking much about it. We turned up with our spiritual shirttails hanging out, lining up at the buffet table as if no one could see the ways in which we have refused to change and adapt to the desires of the king. Some of us have refused to surrender our fears and resentments. These are the old clothes we wear to the king's banquet. These are the clothes we prefer to the wedding robe of new life, and these old clothes are as painful to the king as a bride dressed in black.

We make the same mistake as the underdressed guest who thought the king was just looking for warm bodies at his banquet. He was happy to eat the king's food and enjoy the king's music if that's what the king wants. But it isn't. God is not looking for warm bodies. God is not looking for us to do him a favour, God is looking for wedding guests, who will rise to the occasion of honouring the son. We can do that in shorts and sandals as well as in suits and high heels. Wedding garments are not made out of denim or silk, you see. They are made from the whole fabric of our lives using the patterns God has given us: patterns of justice, forgiveness, compassion, generosity, and peace. When we wear those clothes, we are gorgeous in the sight of the king. Whether we are one or a hundred. Absolutely gorgeous.

To wear a wedding garment is to know the significance of the occasion, to allow God's gracious invitation to change us and live accordingly. Here's a story of what the change might look like. Some of you will remember George Eliot's story of Silas Marner. Silas was an unlikable old miser. He was falsely accused of stealing. So he lived fifteen bitter years as a recluse. His only interest in life was to take out his pile of gold at night and let the shining pieces run through his fingers. One night that too was stolen from him by a burglar. His life was shattered. Then one New Year's Eve a

poor, homeless woman left her little blonde daughter sleeping in front of the fireplace in Silas' cottage. The next day, Silas found the mother's dead body.

Nobody claimed the child, so she lived as a guest of Silas the miser. Slowly the old man fell under the spell of the wonderfully cheerful child. The delight of caring for her gradually caused him to forget his lost gold. As she grew and moved cheerfully among the villagers, Silas too was drawn from his shell and began to speak to his neighbours. The cottage took on a new appearance. Lacy curtains decorated the once-shuttered windows. Silas was happy. There was light in his eyes, a smile on his face, affection in his voice, and a bounce to his step. He was no longer a hermit turned in on himself. The focus of his life had shifted to the little girl and then to his neighbours. His life had been transformed by a guest.

The Kingdom of God does not come about simply by giving in to a royal command. The kingdom comes when something happens in the heart of the guest, then the joy of the king becomes the joy of the guest, and the mission of the king becomes the mission of the guest. So put on your wedding garment. Then you'll be ready whenever the invitation arrives. And you'll want to be ready, because this is a party not not to be missed. There'll never be another one like it. Amen.

Fr Robert Newton