

**SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER<sup>1</sup>**  
**THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY**

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**Lessons:**<sup>2</sup>

**The First Lesson:** Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.<sup>3</sup>

“Moreover the word of the LORD came to me, saying, Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, Thus saith [**SETH**] the LORD; I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown. Israel was holiness unto the LORD, and the firstfruits of his increase: all that devour him shall offend; evil shall come upon them, saith [**SETH**] the LORD. Hear ye the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel:

“Thus saith [**SETH**] the LORD, What iniquity have your fathers found in me, that they are gone far from me, and have walked after vanity, and are become vain? Neither said they, Where is the LORD that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, that led us through the wilderness, through a land of deserts and of pits, through a land of drought, and of the shadow of death, through a land that no man passed through, and where no man dwelt? And I brought you into a plentiful country, to eat the fruit thereof and the goodness thereof; but when ye entered, ye defiled my land, and made mine heritage an abomination. The priests said not, Where is the LORD? and they that handle the law knew me not: the pastors also transgressed against me, and the prophets prophesied by Baal [**BAY-ull**], and walked after things that do not profit.

“Wherefore I will yet plead with you, saith [**SETH**] the LORD, and with your children’s children will I plead. ... For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

**The Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the twenty-second Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.<sup>4</sup>

“And Jesus answered and spake unto them again by parables, and said, The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son, And sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come. Again, he sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come unto the marriage. But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise: And the remnant took his servants, and entreated them spitefully, and slew them. But when the king heard thereof, he was wroth: and he sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city. Then saith [SETH] he to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy. Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage. So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good: and the wedding was furnished with guests.

“And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment: And he saith [SETH] unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness, there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

**Text:**

From the Second Lesson: ““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

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<sup>1</sup> “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

<sup>2</sup> *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxvii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 2:1-9, 13 (KJV).

<sup>4</sup> St. Matthew 22:1-14 (KJV).

<sup>5</sup> St. Matthew 22:11-12 (RSV).

a wedding garment?”<sup>5</sup> In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

### **Homily:**

Jesus must have really liked weddings. He performed His first miracle at a wedding reception and He used wedding imagery in several of His parables. He also used wedding imagery in a more subtle way when he said in St. John’s Gospel, “I go to prepare a place for you ... and I will come again to receive you to myself.” I won’t expound that verse here, but I will say that the Church very quickly began to speak of the Church as the bride of Christ. The roots of that imagery go back to the Old Testament, where several of the prophets depict Israel as the unfaithful wife to whom God continues to be faithful and whom he tries to win back.

The book of Revelation depicts the Messianic banquet at the end of time as the marriage feast of the Lamb. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is the enactment on earth of that heavenly banquet. In this Sacrament Christ comes to claim us as His own, and we are privileged to participate in that celebration to this day.

In today’s Second Lesson, Jesus talks about a wedding reception that the people who were originally invited declined to attend. Some of those people were too busy with their own concerns to respond. Things haven’t changed much.

The people who killed the messengers of the king are the Jewish elite, who persecuted the prophets rather than respond to their call for repentance. The result of that stubbornness was the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile in Babylon.

But this parable was told with a contemporary as well as an historical reference. Most of the Jews of Jesus’ day, and especially their leaders, failed to recognize that, in Jesus the Messiah, God had come to claim His bride. Not only did they not respond to His call for repentance and a return to obedience, but they put Jesus to death and began to persecute His followers as well. The destruc-

tion of and burning of Jerusalem by the Romans is predicted and interpreted as God's punishment for that.

A further result of the negative response on the part of the Jews is that the Apostles turned to the Gentiles and began to win many converts among them. Some of those converts were decent people and some of them were not. The Apostles made no distinction. All were invited, high and low, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, bad and good. But this is where the parable makes an important point. It is true that the marriage feast of the Lamb is open to everyone who is willing to come, but there are conditions. That's where this business of the wedding garment comes in.

The wedding garment was not some kind of uniform that people had to wear. It refers to the simple expectation that you show respect for your host by washing yourself and combing your hair and showing up in the best clothes you have. But there is deep symbolism here as well. The wedding garment represents a change of life. It represents putting off old habits and washing away the past. It represents being born again. The custom of wearing new clothes on Easter picks up that symbolism. The change in the outward appearance reflects an inner transformation, a new and better life.

In the ancient baptismal rite, the candidate was divested of all clothing, renounced the devil and all his ways, recited the Apostles' Creed, and then was exorcized and completely immersed in water three times. He was then vested in a clean white robe, confirmed by the bishop, and escorted to the communion table. The albs worn by the clergy today are reminiscent of those white robes.

Those who respond to the Apostolic invitation are expected to respond with a certain attitude – a willingness, even a desire, to be changed – a genuine sorrow for past sins, a sincere desire and intention to live as God intends for people to live. That is what the wedding garment represents.

In the parable, it is the king himself who examines the guests one by one. That is as it must ultimately be, because only God is able to see into men's hearts. But Jesus did give the Apostles the authority to bind and to loose and the power to forgive or retain sins on earth. That is why Catholic clergy today hear confessions and pronounce absolution in God's name. It is also why clergy are expected to excommunicate people who refuse to repent of grievous sins. We do not bind people and cast them into outer darkness. We leave that to God. But we do protect the congregation from those whose manner of life embarrasses the Church, and who refuse to put on the garment of repentance and show respect for the Sacrament, for the host, and for the other guests.

### **Conclusion:**

I trust that none of you are among those people. I trust that all of you approach God's table with the proper attitude – an attitude of humility – an attitude of openness to God's power to change your life – an attitude of thanksgiving for being included among His people – and an attitude of love and respect for all the others who share there the consecrated bread and wine.

The words of invitation in the Prayer Book reflect this requirement: “Ye who do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to live a new life, following the commandments of God and walking from henceforth in this holy ways; draw near with faith.”

The two key words are “repent” and “intend”. You are not required to be holy. You are not required to be righteous. You are not required to be morally upright. But you are required to intend by the help of God to become that way.

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