

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of St. Thomas More, NYC**  
**October 11, 2020 Streaming Mass**  
**28<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Year A Mt 22:1-14**

Probably for most of us life seems to be going faster and faster and faster. Maybe the late Jimmy Breslin, the newspaper columnist, was right when he describes life as “just a mad dash from high school graduation to the funeral parlor.” But is that the way it has to be; is that the way it should be—so hectic, so frantic, so fast-paced? Today's Gospel reading reminds us that our lives must amount to something, that we have to accomplish something with the opportunities offered to us. Will I merely drift through life, or will I give my life some direction? And, will it be the same direction as that set by Jesus Christ?

Matthew's Gospel describes life's fulfillment with the parable of a wedding feast. Probably it's wedding receptions that have changed least over the centuries. They are a time when petty family animosities and feuds are put on hold; when the celebration is in the air; when all the guests are united in their common affection for the bride and groom. The wedding reception becomes a fitting metaphor for the joy of being in God's presence. God's plan is to usher in rejoicing, not doomsday; celebration, not despair. And everybody, good and bad alike, are invited indiscriminately to take part in the festivities.

But the story tacked on at the end about the guest without a wedding garment seems to put a damper on the celebration. It seems unfair that he should be thrown out just because he's not dressed for the occasion. After all, he was invited in off the street. It is reminiscent of the “fashion police” who stand guard behind the velvet rope at the door of some trendy club, screening out those they decide don't have the right look, the right clothes, the right attitude. We rebel against this kind of discrimination. Even bowling shoes and polyester, even plaid with stripes should be permitted in the Kingdom of God.

Before we criticize St. Matthew too harshly for the appearance of elitism, we should recognize that we have in today's Gospel reading two different parables that have been sewn together, but sewn so clumsily that the seam still shows. The first has a more accepting, a more inviting, a nondiscriminatory quality about it. It says of the king that he invited “bad and good alike.” But with the addition of the second parable about the expulsion of the guest without a wedding garment, we see a sort of eligibility requirement imposed that the first parable lacks. As Matthew tries to join the two parables, he ends up making God appear rather capricious and arbitrary. It is

better to see the two parables as distinct, and each making its own point: the former announcing that access to God's love and healing, to salvation, is something totally unearned, a gift; the latter, the need to be ready to hear the call, the offer when it comes. The question we might consider is "What does it mean to be ready, and to be ready for what?"

In years gone by "to be ready" meant to be ready for the Grim Reaper when he comes knocking on your door. A person must be "in the state of grace at the moment of death," or he/she goes to hell. It was a rather narrow, legalistic way of summing up all the complexities of life, of divine mercy and justice. Being "in" or "out" of the state of grace is not like going back and forth the G.W. Bridge from the state of New York to the state of New Jersey. This view looks at the moments of our life as if they existed in isolation, as distinct points along a line. Looking at sin in this fashion, we make sin into something legalistic, a matter of "committing" sins. Life is more like a snowball, rolling down a hill, gathering more snow as it courses along. Our past, for good or ill, stays with us still; we are the measure of all we have been." More helpful and more accurate it is to recognize the "sinful condition" or "situation" in which we ordinarily find ourselves--halfhearted in our responsibilities, lukewarm in our commitments, distracted from becoming the kind of person we are called to be, and preferring to settle what is mediocre, for what is not worthy of ourselves.

So, I would suggest that we do not "commit" sin, so much as we "find" ourselves in sin and, then, have to decide what am I going to do about it. Am I willing to change and give a new direction to my life, or do I simply ratify what's been going on by saying "I'm too old to change now," or "I have too much invested to pull out now," or whatever rationalization I come up with?. The way in which sin grows in our lives is through a day so full of compromises, so full of pettiness and egoism, that over a period of time those small choices have shaped and molded me as one with a certain kind of character and disposition. Then, eventually something happens whereby I discover I am not the kind of person I like to consider myself as being. I may have allowed nature to take its course, the darker side of my human nature, that is. And, then, I may find myself unwilling to break out of those patterns, those vices. The inertia of the past pulls too heavily on my will to allow for any change to occur. I may have allowed myself to drift through life, or to be so caught up in the spirit of the times, that is only when it's too late that I discover I am no longer "Christian," except in name. So, the possibility of real sin, that insidious kind of evil that eats away at our relation with God, with others, and which destroys the fabric of our very souls, is recognized more from hindsight than it is seen from foresight. What may have begun as a seemingly small and insignificant matter may later be seen to have much larger consequences.

Today's Gospel reminds us that our lives await their fulfillment in a dimension beyond that which we experience today. Already we are shaping what we shall become by the many small choices and decisions we make, many of which we think are of no consequence. Certain moments can come along that throw us out of the "automatic pilot" on which we run our lives—moments when we are forced to confront what we have become, what has been going on in our lives. The challenge is to decide whether I simply want to take the line of least resistance, stay where I am and change nothing, or to make the effort to start anew. Will I allow the course of my life to shape me, or will I shape it?

I said in the beginning that today's Gospel reminds us that our lives must amount to something—and "amount to something" in more than the sense that some high school guidance counselor might intend in giving advice to a student. St. Teresa of Avila, the great mystic of 16th-century Spain, the first woman to be declared a "doctor" of the church, and the saint whose feast we celebrate this Thursday, once said, "When we die, when our lives are being summed up, we shall be judged not by the wealth we have amassed or the prestige attached to our name, but by the simple measure of love, how we've extended ourselves to those who crossed our paths in life." Let us pray that because we have been attentive to the needs of others, because we have been reflective on the course and direction of our own lives, it will be the "wedding garment" of loving and kind deeds that we bring with us to the banquet feast of Paradise.