23 August 2018: Said Eucharist

Thursdays during Ordinary Time

Emily Essex, Cathedral Assistant

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet is not an easy reading to preach on: it can be taken in so many ways that are theologically problematic, it’s message isn’t straightforward, and there is so much that it has to say. I suspect that you’re not keen on staying here all night whilst I try to unpick the whole parable, so instead I want to focus on one question: what is this ‘wedding garment’?

We’re all familiar with the kind of social niceties that require us to dress up for a wedding, especially one of people who you don’t know well: dressing appropriately is a sign of respect for those who have invited you and a mark of your shared celebration of the occasion.

The thing that I and a lot of others struggle with when it comes to this story is that the wedding guests were unprepared, gathered from the streets, a random section of humanity, and the exclusion of someone for not wearing the right kind of clothes resounds with a kind of socio-economic privilege.

St Augustine of Hippo was an early thinker to engage with some of the trickiest questions this parable presents. He draws attention to the fact that this guest has managed to reach the feast, his lack of wedding garment going unnoticed by all until he is in the presence of the host himself. Therefore Augustine concludes: “The garment that was looked for is in the heart, not on the body; for had it been put on externally, it could not have been concealed even from the servants.” (Tractate 7)

The point of the parable is nothing to do with status or social exclusion, it’s about the state of our hearts in approaching the feast. Just as our modern-day wedding garments convey respect, so, Augustine claims, the wedding garment in the parable is worn in honour of the union between Bridegroom and Bride: here the union between Christ and the Church.
Tonight we are also invited to a wedding feast. A celebration and recollection of this union in bread and wine. We are called as the good and bad of the parable were called: out of our busyness or our restfulness or whatever it may be to join in celebration of the union between Christ and the Church.

Augustine’s words speak to us: ‘Put on “the wedding garment:” you I address, who as yet have it not. Ye are already within, already do ye approach to the Feast, and I still have ye not yet the garment to do honour to the Bridegroom; “Ye are yet seeking your own things, not the things which are Jesus Christ’s.”’

Those of you who worship here regularly may have seen the tiles on the floor which lead from here where I’m standing right up to the altar: fortitude, justice, temperance, prudence, mercy…anyone who’s served here will be familiar with ‘humilitas’ - humility - which marks the turning point for all manoeuvres.

But whether you’ve seen them so many times you’ve stopped actually noticing them or whether you might discover them for the first time tonight, I invite all of you as you come up to the altar for communion to think about that journey through the virtues that you are making. Because if you were to come even beyond the altar rail and into the Sanctuary you would find yourself standing directly before the altar on a tile that reads ‘caritas’ - charity, love.

Our approach to the altar is not one that should be made lightly or unthinkingly. We are being called into a reality that is beyond our human experience: the reality of heaven, and as we draw closer to that reality we will find ourselves being clothed in a variety of garments: the garment of temperance, of courage, of humility, and finally the wedding garment, the garment of charity, which fits us finally for that step into the place where God dwells, in this Eucharist: in bread and wine on the altar.

We do not come into God’s presence on our own merits, and thank goodness that we don’t. For we know the perfection of God and though invited into that life few of us believe we are worthy of it. But luckily this garment we are called to put on was not bought with our own merit or by our own efforts, it is not ours to don in recognition of our status or the degrees that we may have achieved. This garment is a gift of the host himself- a gift that fits us for the wedding feast we should never, by ourselves, have been invited to.

We are called to clothe ourselves with charity: a gift from God which transforms our hearts and makes us fit for the feast. But this isn’t necessarily an easy ask. In our first
reading, from the letter to the Ephesians, the Lord God declares: “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”

This is what it means to wear the wedding garment, it means giving up our hearts of stone in exchange for fleshy hearts: hearts that are fragile, that bleed, that are easily broken and broken again. This wedding garment is modelled after Christ Himself who went to His death willingly that we might be stripped of our imperfections and clothed in His righteousness. It is his very own garment which He drapes us with. His very own flesh that we receive in bread and wine this evening. It is his own path, His own death on the cross, which we must walk ourselves if we are to join with Him in celebration at the wedding feast.

We are clothed by Christ and we must accept that vulnerability: both our dependence on God and the difficult road it requires us to walk. But if we do accept that we will find ourselves made fit for the wedding banquet of heaven, and that is something worth celebrating.