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Text: Matthew 22:1 – 14

Place: Midweekchurch

Title: Get ready for the big wedding!

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Jesus could tell a cracker of a story. With just a few words he paints pictures that are simple, yet so powerful. The story he tells in **Matthew 22** is only fourteen verses long but it speaks about every person who has ever lived and their eternal destiny. You and I are in this one!

Bookending the story are powerful descriptions of two places. Each description is just a sentence long. I want to spend a bit of time looking at those places because each one of us is currently making choices that will determine whether we spend eternity in one or the other.

Then we'll look at how Jesus shows how we can be sure of where we're going.

The first picture is drawn in **verse 2: The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son.**

When Jesus describes what being in heaven is like he chooses to picture it as a wedding feast that a King has thrown for his Son. In Jesus' day, as in ours, a wedding feast, or reception, is one of the happiest occasions we ever take part in. It's almost impossible to come away from a wedding not happy. It's a celebration of love!

My images of wedding receptions are of laughter and light and food and friends and celebration and love and family. Of grandad and grandma dancing. Of little girls in their best dresses being princesses like the bride. Family members catching up. Conversations and memories. The twinkle in the eye of married couples as they remember their wedding day. And through it all, joy. Joy in being together. Joy in celebrating. Joy for the married couple.

I've been to some great wedding receptions, but never one put on by a king for his son. Now the only reason I saw any of William and Kate's wedding was because everyone else in the family was watching it and I happened to be in the same room. But I was reading a book all the time. So the occasional glimpses I got of it showed a very fancy wedding. I don't think there was any footage of the reception, but I reckon it must have been an incredible reception. Extravagant! The absolute best of everything! Jesus is describing a reception even greater.

When Jesus chooses to describe heaven it is not a picture of sitting on clouds strumming harps and eating spreadable cheese, being politely bored.

The closest earthly comparison we have for being part of the kingdom of heaven is being at a party. A feast. The wedding reception for the Son of the King! Now that's a great picture of what heaven is like!

But I want to stop for a moment and think about what this image means for Jesus. He is the Son in the parable. This image of heaven as a wedding feast was a very powerful one for Jesus. His first miracle was at a wedding, turning water into wine. It pointed to the fullness of life he brings, the celebration of the kingdom of heaven. And it pointed to his own wedding day. And even as he tells this parable in **Matthew 22** he is in his last week before the crucifixion. He is only three or four days away from his betrayal, rejection, suffering and murder. He is surrounded by the hostile leaders of his people who are plotting his death even as they speak to him.

But how does he describe his kingdom? A wedding feast.

The joy of this wedding feast sustained him in these days. His desire to complete all the preparations and make it a reality enabled him to scorn the shame of the Cross and endure the suffering he was about to enter into. This story describes the love of his heavenly Father who from eternity past has planned this for his Son. And he will achieve it.

Jesus says, 'That's what heaven is like.'
Let's picture that image again for a moment.

The room for this wedding feast is bathed in a warm yellow light. You're standing among the tables filled with the most extravagant of foods. All around you are the sounds of laughter, conversation, music, dancing. People are smiling, talking, enjoying this great occasion together. In the centre of it all is the joyful groom. He's bearing the scars of battle but is all the more glorious for them.

Now let's pan the scene out a bit as the camera stays focussed on the room but leaves through a window. The laughter and music recedes and the warmth and light radiate out the window into the darkness outside.

A terrible, complete darkness.

At the other end of the parable Jesus gives a one-sentence description of hell. **Verse 13: 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'**

Jesus' description of heaven in only a few words evoked so many associations in our minds. Here his description of hell uses two of the scariest words I know: *outside* and *darkness*.

As a child I was terrified of the night. Our house backed onto bush and when Mum sent me down to the clothesline at night I was petrified. It wasn't too bad going down the yard – you could see things coming. But once I turned around and my back was to the dark bush, full of menace, the hairs on the back of my neck prickled and I ended up sprinting to the back door! I could think of nothing worse than getting to the back door and find it locked with my family safe and warm inside and me outside to face the terrors of the darkness alone.

When I read Jesus' words here I still shudder.

I can't think of anything worse than being outside in the darkness, with all the associations of loneliness, vulnerability, fear, threat. Especially after Jesus' description of the feast. To be outside is to be excluded. It's knowing what's on inside but prevented from being there. And after the light and warmth of the feast, the darkness is complete. It's an utter darkness, the deepest darkness, darkness that can be felt.

We went on a tour of a cave one holiday and the guide turned the lights off so we could experience total darkness. Once our eyes got used to it the darkness was overwhelming. It was like a heaviness, a blanket we couldn't shake off. There was no sense of space – or rather of too much space – a void that could have gone on forever yet filled with danger. It was bearable only because the lights would come back on soon.

But Jesus is describing a suffocating darkness where there is no relief. But not only that he describes it as a place of **weeping and gnashing of teeth**. The man is bound and thrown outside into this darkness. It's a place of punishment, of torment. The weeping speaks of anguished pain, of constant torment and sorrow. It's the overwhelming regret of knowing what you've missed out on. It's being outside looking in, knowing that your choices brought you here.

Hell is being locked out from every sign of God's love and goodness.

People who say that hell is here on earth have no idea of the extent of God's mercy we enjoy here, even to those who want nothing to do with him. Hell is the absence of any sign of God's favour and mercy. Cut off from all of God's goodness: a fate unimaginable in its horror.

Proverbs 11:7 says **When the wicked die their hope perishes**. They are finally and completely cut off from all source of comfort and mercy. No wonder then that Jesus says there will be **gnashing of teeth**. These people will be forced to acknowledge that God is perfectly just in his punishment. It was their choices that brought them here yet in a frenzied, painful anger they still show their contempt for God. They gnash their teeth like a beast caught in a net, powerless to escape.

What a terrible place! What a terrible fate!

People say that all this talk about hell is there just to scare us into heaven. But Jesus talks about hell more than anyone else in the New Testament. And he does that to warn you and I about its reality and its danger. And if it scares us, good! It's meant to! There are so many lies out there about hell. That it's the party place, not heaven. That we'll be there with all our friends.

In this parable Jesus tells us the truth.

Heaven is the wedding feast. It's the place of joy and friends and warmth and light. Hell is outside in the darkness with all the terror those words can convey.

Jesus gives us just two options for eternity: Heaven or hell. One is so incredibly good, the other indescribably awful.

Given a choice between the two, of course we would choose heaven. But I said before that those who are cast outside are there because of their own choices. And Jesus makes that clear between the bookends of the two descriptions.

The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. And the King sends out invitations to that feast. Our invitation to heaven comes from nothing else than the wide-armed, open-hearted, generous hospitality of the King. God delights in his Son and he invites us to share his delight and be part of his eternal joy expressed to Jesus. Who would refuse such a gracious invitation?

Jesus says, 'Most people.'

In **verses 5 & 6** there are two reactions: indifference and opposition. You may have come across people who are almost violent in their opposition to God. There is an anger just below the surface. If you start talking about Jesus you're told in no uncertain terms to stop it. Right at this moment people are violently opposed to God, seizing, mistreating and killing God's servants.

But that probably doesn't describe any in this room. But **verse 5** might. **But they paid no attention and went off – one to his field, another to his business.** It isn't a violent opposition, just paying no attention.

You might have heard the truth of the gospel, the invitation of God to share his joy, but you have politely walked away. At least in your heart. And you go about your life – back to the farm or business – and not let God's claim have any real effect on your life.

But that choice, as polite as you might be about it, is refusing the King's invitation. And when the King invites, it's as good as a command. Can you imagine someone getting an invite to William and Kate's wedding and saying, 'Sorry, I really can't be bothered.'? If you're invited, you'd go! But too many people aren't interested in God's invitation. If you refuse to come to the King's wedding banquet, the only option is outside. You are making a very dangerous and tragic decision.

It seems incredible that the King could have his invitation refused, but in **verses 8 – 10** he is not deterred. It is unthinkable that the wedding banquet of his Son be unattended. God will be honoured. Jesus' salvation will be effective. The wedding will go ahead.

So invitations are sent to everyone. The servants are instructed to bring in anyone they find, good and bad. And they are all given special clothes to wear. It was the custom in those days to provide everyone coming to your wedding with special wedding clothes. In that way there are no distinctions. You can't pick the rich or poor, high or low, good or bad. Everyone is clothed the same.

In the story they represent the clothes of Christ's righteousness. Entry is by accepting the invitation and putting on the perfect life of Christ – not our feeble attempts at righteousness. But in **verses 11 & 12** the party halts – the King has noticed someone not in his wedding clothes.

When he's quizzed about it, Jesus says in **verse 12 the man was speechless.** He had no excuse, no explanation. He had been offered the clothes but refused to wear them. In other words he was offered Christ's righteousness to wear, but he preferred to enter the King's presence in his own righteousness. And it was not acceptable.

Which is tragic because he was as good as in! He was right there. All he had to do was accept the clothes but he would not. When he is thrown outside Jesus shows us that hell is only for those who have rejected all of God's gracious gifts.

The gospel is an invitation to share God's joy. He offers everything you need to be able to take part and enjoy it. His gifts are freely given.

And yet so many refuse.

Wouldn't it be terrible if you are making choices like that last man? Here you are, for all intents and purposes, in. Enjoying the appetisers of the banquet – fellowship with God's people and hearing his word. But in your heart you're refusing to wear the appropriate clothes. Rather than accept the gift of Christ's righteousness you're stubbornly hanging on to your own. You believe you're good enough for God, and maybe secretly believe he should be pleased with you.

Hear Jesus' warning! Many are invited but few are chosen. Are you ready for the big wedding? Are you dressed appropriately?

Jesus declares that hell will be the final place for those who refuse to come on God's terms.

Are you ready for the big wedding?