

**From the morning service held at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Sunday 15 October 2017, the prayer and the sermon by Kerry Enright, minister at Knox.**

**Prayer of Praise and Confession**

God our mother, Inviting host, Generous provider,  
Synchronising creation with your music's rhythm,  
Throwing parties for all to enjoy,  
God of all life, we praise you.

God the Christ, Joy lived,  
Threading humankind with celebration  
Companion at every good party,  
God of all life, we praise you.

God Holy Spirit, opening hearts to the thrill of love  
Melting coldness, overcoming coolness  
Embracing excluded ones,  
God of all life, we praise you.

When we limit love, when we kill joy, when we judge others  
Forgive us.

For life without passion, for hope doused, for lukewarm faith  
Forgive us.

Clothe us with full-hearted openness to you and your way and your people, that we may put you before all else and all others and all things, in Jesus we pray. Amen.

**“Dressed for the feast” a sermon based on Matthew 22:1-14**

Chris Hoke is a prison chaplain in USA. He tells the story of what happened at a Sunday afternoon Bible study in his prison.

More than 20 men, more than usual, filed into the room and it was crowded, not enough chairs, people perched all around. The group had a natural leader, Richard, and Richard had brought the whole of his part of the prison.

One of the group was selected to read, hesitantly, but persistently. He started reading the parable we just heard.

Jesus was comparing the kingdom of heaven to a wedding banquet, a party, wanting everyone to come and celebrate with him. Those invited to the banquet made excuses. One had a farm. One a business. They made light of it. Others seized the king's messengers and killed them.

The reader kept reading.

“The king was angry ... he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding feast is ready, but ... but those invited are not worthy. Go therefore to the main streets and invite everyone you find.’”

The study had sagged in energy but at that point Richard sprung from his seat, jumped to his feet.

With the full use of language, if you know what I mean, he started acting out the story. The king said “Go out into the streets, and tell all the people like us,” as he pointed around the group, “tell all the people like us to come to the party. Good and bad. Street people.”

And Richard grabbed the people perched around and pulled them into a circle.

“See, people like me, we know where all the bad people are at! So we gotta be the ones to go and invite them, right? I’m your messenger, right here!”

“Both bad and good; it says it right there.”

“And if we’re here at the party, having a good time with the king, there’d be less of us jackin’ car stereos an’ shit on the streets, right?”

Well the chaplain thought the story would end there, with everyone in the hall, joining in the feast, enjoying the party, feeling included. He knew what was coming next.

But no one had told the persistent reader to stop reading. So he kept on reading, until the chaplain asked him to stop.

Richard sensed something was happening, so he overruled the chaplain and told the reader to keep going. Richard seemed to sense that this story was too good and that the chaplain was trying to cover up the bad part.

So they heard:

“But when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. And . . . and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him . . . into the outer darkness, into that place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

“Just what I thought,” Richard said. “What do you expect from people like us? We don’t have all the right clothes. We never look right! You should know that!”

“Why would you even invite us to any of this if you’re just gonna humiliate us and throw us out anyway? It’d be better not to come than have you break our effing hearts!”

“You get our hopes up!” he pointed at the chaplain. “And it’s beautiful what you tell us—that God is different, that he wants everyone. Even the bad people like me. And I’m like excited and wanting to tell everyone—” Then this ...

“OK, hang on.” The chaplain explained quickly that in first-century Palestine, it was the custom for the host to provide these over-garments for the guests, right at the door, before they got into the banqueting hall.

“It’s not about who comes dressed up nice or not; everyone is given the celebration attire. So if this guy’s not wearing it, it’s not about poverty. There’s some other reason. It’s an insult, a direct disrespect, in front of everyone in his own home. He’s refusing to celebrate.”

Richard spoke back:

“But we might not want to wear those clothes. We don’t play by all the little rules. You didn’t really want us at all! Or did you just so you can throw us back out into the darkness?”

“Better to stay in the streets with the bad people than be told you’re wanted and then find out you’re really not!”

“You’re just assuming,” I said, “the one not wearing the garment is one of the ‘bad’ people who were invited off the streets. But it doesn’t say that. What if it’s one of the ‘good’ people who feels suddenly uncomfortable around all these ‘bad’ folks pouring in from the streets and sitting next to him or her. Someone who feels better than these folk. Someone who needs to set himself apart, not putting on the same robe as all these undeserving ones?”

“How do you think the host would feel, watching his new flood of guests that he invited from the streets to share his joy, now all feeling judged by this one guy, who’s totally killing the party, making all the rest of the guests feel uneasy, awkward, unwanted, not belonging?”

“He’d throw that guy outside and tie him up, let him get it out of his system, grumble all he wants—grind his teeth, I don’t care—until he was ready to come back in and share the joy of the king who wants everyone. Even people like you!”

But for Richard it seemed too good to be true

He called out “Back your stuff up, Chris,” he said on his way out the door with a finger pointed at me. “Send me a copy of whatever scholar you’re talking about. I wanna see that in print!”

What is the right dress for God’s banquet?

When the early church heard the word “robe”, they would have thought of the new followers of Jesus in their baptismal robes. Baptism was not just a ceremony with words and water.

Baptism relocates us, puts our life in jeopardy, exposes us to the influence of God, so we can enjoy being at the wedding banquet.

If we aren't prepared to take steps to show that being at that banquet means everything to us, it's best not to be there. It's not enough to turn up along with everyone else.

We need to sense the significance of the occasion, to submit ourselves to the joy of God's party, to let God live God's life in us.

It is called repentance, inviting God to turn our heart, inviting God to remake our imagination, to reform us. Not because we have to but because we know we are entering into the presence of a gracious, forgiving, joyful God.

We will be left out if we imagine God's love carries with it no expectation of a response from us.

God needs to be acknowledged as the host – not only the issuer of an amazingly inclusive invitation but also one who expects us to live the life of those who are at the party.

What is the proper dress for the banquet?

We come dressed for God's kingdom to happen among us, in us, with us. We come asking for it to happen, waiting for it to happen, ready for it to happen.

Knowing that when we accept the invitation, when we dress for the banquet, everything changes.

*(based on an article by Chris Hoke as recorded in the Christian Century and reflections on the reading by Sam Wells, vicar of St Martin's in the Fields, London).*

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***growing in courage to live the Jesus way***



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