

Called and chosen (Matthew 22.1-14)

Neil Millar

‘Many are called, but few are chosen.’ What did Jesus mean when he said this? I have to say, I find it puzzling coming as it does at the conclusion of this tale of the wedding feast. As I hear the parable, it seems more a case of many being called but few choosing to come. And, even this is puzzling, given the situation. Here’s a king, out of the goodness of his heart and with great generosity, inviting a bunch of subjects to join him to celebrate his son’s wedding, a most significant and joyous occasion, and they refuse. Why?

Normally when the rich and famous hold a function, the hoi polloi are falling over themselves to be there, to be seen there! What’s not to like about a royal celebration? Think of the food; the magnificent spread, a chance to check out the palace!! Tell me, if the Queen of England invited you to a special celebration at Buckingham Palace (age and travel restrictions notwithstanding) would you accept? For most of us, it’d be the invitation of a lifetime. We’d probably feel nervous, concerned about our clothes and manners, but I imagine we’d brush up on our p’s and q’s, spruce up, and accept. Not to go would be to miss a wonderful opportunity, and more significantly, would be rude and ungrateful. Which is exactly how their refusal appears in this story. So, what’s motivating these people? And, how does this relate to the comment about many called and few chosen?

If we take the parable in its gospel context, it would seem that Jesus is challenging those who prided themselves precisely in being ‘chosen’ of God. This parable is third in a series of three that seem to be aimed directly at those who believed they had it all together in terms of their life and theology, and who tended to look in judgment on everyone else. These parables all seem to be saying the opposite. Far from being the paragons of virtue they believed

they were, these religious heavies (the chief priests and elders) were dishonouring and rejecting God. In the first two stories, the parable of the two sons, and the parable of the wicked tenants, those who had obligations and knew better are exposed as wilfully disregarding their commitments and flagrantly disrespecting the one who has entrusted them. In this third parable, the pattern continues.

Here we have a king, eager to include them in this key celebration. *'He sent his servants to call those who'd been invited,'* it says, *'but they would not come.'* There are no apologies given, it's not that they couldn't come; it's just plain wilfulness – they *would not* come. And note, they're not being conscripted into a war here or into hard labour. It's a party! A feast, with music and dancing and fine food – a gracious gift.

The king is remarkably patient at this point. Instead of blowing them off, he has another go; gives them a second chance. He sends others, with a special plea, *'Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.'* No need to bring anything; it's all ready, just come. *'But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, mistreated them, and killed them.'* It gets more and more outrageous - this story goes out of its way to emphasise the deliberateness and offensiveness of their behaviour! It is a very clear rejection.

Now the king is outraged, and now the story goes out of its way to emphasise the severity of his response: *'he sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.'* (And for Matthew's first readers an allusion to the destruction of Jerusalem by Emperor Titus in 70AD is surely intended).

Well, we might expect that'd be the end of this king's interest to include the citizens of his land, but not so. Instead, he casts the invitation wider: *'The*

wedding is ready but those invited were not worthy', he says to his servants. 'Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' And off they went, gathering 'both good and bad' until 'the wedding hall was filled with guests.'

Now note that little comment, 'both good and bad'. This would surely have annoyed all the 'self-righteous' crew listening to this story, the ones he's having a go at. And it also challenges the whole notion of merit. If we thought this was a story about moral effort, we'd be mistaken. There's nothing about earning an invitation or being worthy of a place at the table here ... Rather, it's all about the willingness to accept the invitation. Which would be great, if the parable stopped there. But then comes this further, rather troubling, twist in the tale.

One guest has the dress code wrong, and sticks out like a sore thumb. This is bad enough (if you've ever been in that situation), but it gets a whole lot worse when he's confronted and then cast out angrily by his seemingly hypervigilant host. On the surface, it seems harsh, and Matthew's ghoulish language about being '*cast into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*' doesn't help. What if this guest just had bad dress sense, or was too poor to own a robe? Is this incident showing that God's welcome is conditional after all – that's it not just about the willingness to accept the invitation, but also demands that we meet certain approved standards?

Well, there is evidence that in those days, guests at a royal wedding were provided with festal robes by the host, thereby making everyone equal. A bit like those labourers hired late but paid the same wage as the others, it kept everyone on an equal footing. 'In this way the poor need not be ashamed of their rags, nor the rich proud of their dinner jackets and gowns.' (Michael

Green). The idea, then, is that this guest was excluded not because he lacked the means to dress appropriately; but because he lacked the humility to be clothed by his host. And if this is the case, we can appreciate the king's bafflement. *'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?'* The guest, were told, *'was speechless'*, which suggests he had no excuse, that it was in fact a deliberate snub, (much like the earlier invitees). Which brings us back to the importance not only of receiving the host's invitation, but also of being 'clothed' by the host, which invites us to be humble – 'poor in spirit' (as Jesus described it earlier in this gospel).

Jesus' persistent critique of the religious leaders of his time was that they paraded their position, their 'chosenness', as a possession, an achievement; were full of pride. And what he dearly wants them to see is that this stance, this smug presumption is undermining and alienating; separating them from God and others, and from their vocation 'to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with their God' (Micah 6.8). On the whole, it seems that Jesus didn't get through to most of them. Sadly, they continued to reject the bridegroom in their midst, and the invitation to share his joy. The bridegroom will be violently killed, though the resurrection is the definitive sign that God's love, life, and invitation persist.

Well, that was then, but what of now, what about us? For surely pride and presumption can trip us all. Many are called, Jesus says – Jews, Gentiles, good and bad; but few are chosen. In the counter-intuitive logic of the kingdom, being 'chosen' is not about earning our selection, making ourselves worthy or relying on the merit of birth, wealth, success or even our virtue. It's about daring to believe we **are** invited. And daring humbly to be 'clothed' by our host; our way of being transfigured by receptivity to what God delights to give us – *'clothed with compassion, kindness, patience and love'* to quote

Colossians (3.12-15). It's this that frees us to participate unselfconsciously and uninhibitedly in the 'wedding feast' of the son; to share in the love, joy, and communion of God's kingdom. Many are called but few are chosen. Or, he could have said: You are all called but will you receive what I desire to give you. Just receive it, receive me ... everything's ready ... come.