

Today we hear the parable of a King who arranged a wedding for His Son and about how things went with the guests who were invited. Jesus tells parables to describe the Kingdom of Heaven, how God is at work in the world through His Son. As with many of the parables, our Lord sets forth with clear, precise words, how we are to understand the parable, what the point of the parable is: **“For many are called, but few are chosen”** (Matt 22:14). That is the point. This is how we are to understand the parable. It speaks of the doctrine of election, or predestination.

Predestination is a topic that many Christians avoid. It has often been in dealing with this doctrine that teachers and preachers have gone into error. On the one hand, the French reformer John Calvin, a contemporary of Luther, taught that since the Bible says that people are only saved because of God’s choice, then those who are not saved, were selected by God for condemnation. It’s a nice, symmetric system. It makes sense to reason. But many were horrified by the idea that God from eternity created most people only to send them to hell. So to counter Calvin’s teaching, others taught that the choice is made not by God, but by us. It is we who choose whether to believe or not. That view has really come to dominate in this county. Where preaching has become all about the art of persuasion, to lead people to choose Jesus.

But both of these ideas about predestination are wrong. Reason goes astray when it demands that what God’s Word teaches must make sense to us. God’s Word is not given to make a perfect clean system that does not offend our ideas of common sense. Scripture is given to warn us about sin, and to comfort us with what God has done for us in His Son. That is exactly what the parable today does. Even though human reason can easily and quickly go astray, the teaching of election is important for Christians to know. It is useful and it is comforting. We see this in three ways in today’s Gospel. First, we see the teaching of election itself, what it is, what our election is based on. Secondly, we see the warning against refusing God’s call. Finally, we see what sweet comfort this teaching gives us, that God, in His wisdom, chose us for eternal salvation, and that He considered, even before the foundations of the world were laid, how He would bring us to this salvation.

### I.

It is a clear teaching of God’s Word that all those who inherit eternal life were chosen for salvation by God before the creation of the world. This choice is not because of anything in us, but solely God’s grace for us in His Son. St. Paul writes in Ephesians, chapter 1: **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing...even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world...In love He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ...”** (Eph 1:3-5). In Romans St. Paul says that those whom God **“foreknew He also predestined...and those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified”** (Rom 8:29-30). That is to say, everything God does for us, calling us to faith, justifying us, even our final glorification at the resurrection of the dead on the Last Day, is all rooted in His knowing us in His Son and His choosing us in Christ.

It is on the basis of this statement of God choosing and saving us that St. Paul then gives the wonderful words which comfort the Christian as he lives his life in this world, which is a life lived under the cross. Because of God’s choosing His elect, Paul goes on to tell us that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. We may indeed be overcome by tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, or sword. But nothing, **“neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation”** can separate God’s elect from Him. No one, not the devil, not the world, not your weak sinful flesh, can bring any charge against God’s elect. Not because of any strength in yourself, but because God has declared you to be His. Or as our Lord put it so simply to the disciples on the night He was betrayed, **“You did not choose me, but I chose you”** (Jn 15:16). Being a disciple, a follower, of Jesus, salvation itself, is not because of anything in us. It is entirely because of our loving Father in heaven, who loved and saved us in Christ Jesus.

We see this in the very first verse of the parable: **“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a King who gave a wedding feast for His Son.”** The way God is at work in the world in His Son is likened to a wedding feast. The Lord is a bridegroom who takes a bride. He takes human nature to be His own. This was the plan from the very beginning. God by His very nature is a redeemer. Being God He knew that our race would fall into sin, into bondage under Satan, deserving God’s eternal wrath and condemnation. And yet before this world was even created, God determined

to redeem us. The Son's taking on human flesh was not a contingency, it was not Plan B, it was not an afterthought. This was God's plan for redeeming creation before creation even existed. His desire and plan for your salvation was there before the heavens and world were even made.

This is what is shown so beautifully at holy Christmas. The Son of God takes on our human flesh. We are but ashes and dust, corrupted by sin and fallen away from God, justly deserving His present and eternal punishment. But this God weds Himself to our humanity. He takes upon Himself our weakness and frailty. It is when Jesus, the God-Man, begins His ministry that John the Baptist announces, "**the kingdom of heaven is at hand**" (Matt 3:2). It is no wonder that the Kingdom of Heaven is then likened to a wedding!

This is what God has done for all mankind. But how does this help us? The parable tells us. The servants are sent "**to call those who were invited to the wedding feast**" (Matt 22:3). The invitation given is this: "**See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast**" (Matt 22:4). The invitation tells us that the King has done everything. Everything that was needed for us to be reconciled with God, cleansed, forgiven, able to participate in the feast of salvation, is already done. Here we see again, the clear teaching of Scripture that our salvation has nothing to do with our works, or our choice. The invitation is not given only to those who are worthy or deserving in themselves. It lies entirely in the King and what He has done to make the feast ready. And He sends His messengers out to all whom they can find.

Here you see the heart of the doctrine of election: it is all God's work. It is a work He has done entirely in love, entirely on account of His Son. That is what the church proclaims. That is what preachers, the servants sent by the King, are to preach. The preaching of the Gospel is the wedding invitation. It is not the preaching of works, telling you what you must do to earn God's love, how you can make yourself worthy of attending the feast. It is telling you, "Everything is prepared. Everything is ready. Come!"

## II.

But we also see in the parable that those who were first invited "**would not come.**" Others "**paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized His servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them.**" Here we see the warning, the admonition against unbelief. Jesus tells this parable to "**the chief priests and Pharisees**" (Matt 21:45). He is pointing out to them what they are doing by their rejection of Him. These are the students and scholars of Scripture. They know the promises of the Messiah and they have seen and heard Jesus' signs and teaching. But they reject Him. They reject His preaching that salvation is not by obedience to the Law, that righteousness is not from trust in the self, but rather salvation is given in Christ, the righteousness of God, the Lamb who bears away the sin of the world. They thought that they could reject the Lord's Christ and still be the chosen nation of God.

So too many today think they can reject the salvation given in Christ Jesus alone, but still be welcomed at the feast of salvation. They delude themselves thinking they can spurn the Lord's Bride, the holy church in this life, and be received in joy by the Bridegroom. And those who would invite them to the wedding feast here, who call them to repentance and faith, they disregard, they treat shamefully, they kill. Why is this? Why do the pharisees, why do so many today, spurn the Lord's call? Because when the Lord God says, "**Come to the wedding feast,**" that is, "I wish to save you!" He is not saying, "Remain in your sins without repentance! Stay just as you are and go forth without amending your lives! Do whatever you want, live however you see fit!" Many will not come to the wedding because it means they have to die to sin. It means they have to live by repentance and faith, turning away from sin and toward God's mercy in Christ Jesus. It is far better, they think, to spend this life pursuing its pleasure and joys.

We see an even sterner warning in the man in the wedding hall, who has no wedding garment. There are those who join themselves to the Christian congregation outwardly. But inwardly, they trust not in the blood and righteousness of Jesus, they do not clothe themselves in the garment of faith. They rather want to weave their own garment of righteousness and holiness. In spite of what is heard in the church, they demand that salvation and standing before God be on their own terms. Jesus warns us here against unbelief, against using His forgiveness as an excuse to go on living in sin, "God forgave me for what I've done today, I'll go and do it again tomorrow!"

Such a person can fool any human being, every person in the congregation. But they will not fool God. Trust in the self, refusing to turn from sin, that will only hear these words: “**Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth**” (Matt 22:13). We see here the reason why people go to eternal condemnation. It is not at all because God does not desire their salvation or is not serious about working to bring them to faith. On the contrary, Christ died for the entire world. The Lord sends His preachers to proclaim this to all. The call to faith is extended to all. God is serious in His invitation. People go into the outer darkness, are eternally separated from God, because that is what they desire, because they refuse to heed the invitation. That is the sad reality and warning of this parable.

### III.

But when we consider what God’s Word in its entirety teaches us about election, we are to find comfort. This teaching, this parable, is given us by God in order that we might be comforted, and free of anxiety. It is easy for us to hear this parable and its stern warning and wonder and be troubled about ourselves. “Am I too, among the elect? Is my name written in the Book of Life? How can I know?” Our Father in heaven would not have His Christians in doubt about this. This is why He has given His Holy Word. There you hear what God says about you. His desire is for your salvation. That is what God’s Word says again and again. You hear His Word which tells you of all that He has done for you, that He loves you, that He has sent His Son to die for you, that He wants you, and that Word has His promise to work faith, to give, bestow, and strengthen it. That is what God wants to do.

And however troubled the Christian may be by his sins, however vexed you may be in this life, you are to rest secure knowing that the fact that you are here, that you are a believer, that God brought you to the waters of Holy Baptism, that you have heard His Word, that you receive the pledge and seal of the forgiveness of sins in the Holy Communion, all of this, everything God has done, is doing, and will do to bring you to the faith and preserve you in it, He deigned to do from the very beginning. What you hear in the invitation is given to you concretely in time because of God’s eternal decree and desire to save you in Christ Jesus. Even though we sometimes founder, fall, and do not immediately get back up when He calls us, this parable shows us that our Father in heaven continually sends out His servants to call the guests, “**Come to the wedding feast!**”

And here you are! The sheep hear the voice of their Shepherd. Here we see fulfilled what we confess in the Third Article of the Creed:

*I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.*

*In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.*

*In this Christian Church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers.*

*On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true.*