*The LCA provides this sermon edited for lay-reading, with thanks to the original author.*

Sermon for Year A, Proper 23Text: Matthew 22:1-14

You’re invited. You’re invited to a celebration. You’re invited to join in God’s great celebration.

People sometimes think that Christian faith is all very sad and solemn. Yes, there is a side of Christian faith that is very deep, that goes to the depths of human experience, beyond the depths of human experience, to the point where God confronts every evil in all its terror.

The cross of Jesus is the stark symbol of the terror and tragedy of human life, of human life turned against its maker and lover.

And yes, there is a side of Christian faith that is all about self-denial, of facing and even embracing hardship and suffering, because comfort and indulgence can become a huge barrier between us and our God.

But at its very heart Christian faith is all about life, wonderful life, life as a gift, as a gift from God, life given a second time, life restored, life saved from death, by the loving forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

If you think about our celebrations, celebrations are all about life. We like to celebrate life, celebrate the special events of life, celebrate the milestones of our lives.

We want to celebrate by coming together, by sharing with other people. We want to capture some of the joy of living, the joy, the deep emotion that bubbles up when you experience the goodness of life. Joy comes from deep within. But joy is multiplied when it is shared.

We want to be able to laugh and smile and sing together. Joy is infectious. We receive joy from one another, and we give joy to one another. When we have something to rejoice about, we want to rejoice together.

And how we will share our joy? How will we celebrate? Somehow most celebrations involve food, good food and drink. Because sharing food is a very practical way of sharing joy.

So we put on a feast, a banquet, a party. Food is something we all need. But when we celebrate we pile on more food than we need. Celebration is more than survival. Celebration is all about a life that is richer and fuller than survival. Celebration is all about sharing the gift of life that is fulfilled and enriched.

Sadly many celebrations today become an excuse for self-indulgence, for drunkenness and abuse and selfishness, which is taking the good things of life and turning them into something selfish and destructive.

Celebration is a true celebration when it embraces the very best of life. Celebration is a true celebration when it gives glory to our God as the giver of life.

The Bible readings for today are all about celebrating the goodness of our God.

The first reading was from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah has many harsh things to say, because he is talking to a people at a time when they had turned away from God, He has many gloomy things to say, because he warns the people that they will be defeated and life will become very hard. But he points the people to a time when God will rescue them. God will defeat their enemies. God will save the people from their distress.

At the same time, Isaiah is painting a picture of God’s final victory over all evil, of God’s salvation from all misery. He speaks of deliverance and salvation for the whole world:

*On this mountain the Lord will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations, he will swallow up death forever. The sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of this people from all the earth. The Lord has spoken.*

God will save people from death and he will bring people to his celebration of life:

*On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all the peoples, a banquet of aged wine - the best of meats and the finest of wines.*

And people will join in the celebration, praising God:

*Surely this is our God; we trusted in him and he saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in him. Let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.*

Our psalm today is Psalm 23. You all know it as the Psalm of the Good Shepherd. But did you notice how the psalm ends? With a great celebration!

The Lord who leads us and guides us through life, like a shepherd providing for and protecting his sheep, brings us to a great celebration of his victory:

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head will oil. My cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

We celebrate when we share in the salvation of our God. That is a celebration that we share in now. And a celebration that continues into all eternity.

The second reading takes us to the New Testament, to Paul’s letter to the Christians in Philippi. Of all the letters in the New Testament, this letter to the Philippians has the deepest sense of joy.

We heard it in the reading: *Rejoice in the Lord always! I say it again: Rejoice!*

Rejoice in the Lord, means rejoice in your relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. You are living in his forgiveness and his salvation. That is the very best reason to rejoice.

Throughout this letter Paul speaks about taking this spirit of joy into every part of your life. Celebrating can be a special time of coming together. Celebration is also an attitude to life.

It is a life of trust and prayer in a spirit of thanksgiving.
It is knowing the peace of God that goes beyond all human understanding.

It is looking for everything that is noble, pure, right good, holy, admirable - focusing on all that is good, on all that comes from God, and building your life around them.

And the Gospel of course is about a wedding celebration. Jesus tells a parable about a wedding banquet. He tells of a man who puts on a wedding banquet for the marriage of his son. He tells of a king who celebrates the marriage of the prince.

The story is obviously a parable about God, and about Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

But why a wedding feast? The people knew weddings as one of the great celebrations of life. In the cycles of life, for two people to come together, to join their lives, to continue the cycle of life, that was a celebration that the whole town would join in and celebrate. It was a celebration that would continue for several days.

The Bible uses the wedding feast as a picture of the celebration between God and his people. Jesus is sometimes called the bridegroom.

If Jesus is the bridegroom, who is the bride? The Bible speaks of the Christian church as the bride of Christ. The Christian church, which is all people who are brought to share this new love of God through the forgiving love of Christ is called the bride of Christ.

Christ loves his bride, and his bride is devoted to Christ. They share a life of wonderful, selfless love and deep, serving devotion.

So now Jesus tells this story of a father who gives a wedding banquet for his son, of a king who puts on a wedding feast for his prince.

But like many of the parables of Jesus, there is a twist.

The father prepares the feast, kills the fatted calf, lays out the tables, decorates the banquet hall. Then he sends his servants to summon the guests, the guests who have already been invited to share in the celebrations.

But they do not want to come. They refuse the invitation.

There seems to be two strands to the story, two different versions that have been brought together.

In the local village version, the guests just cannot be bothered. They have work to do. They are too busy, on their farms or in their businesses. They are preoccupied with what they want to do for themselves. They seem to have no idea of what they are missing out on. So they just ignore the invitation.

In the royal version, the guests turn on the servants, and beat them and kill them. If they refuse to come when they are summoned, their refusal is an act of rebellion against the king. That is why it says that the king was furious, and sent his soldiers to punish their city.

Here Jesus is thinking especially of how the religious leaders of Jerusalem turned against the prophets that God sent, and then turned against Jesus himself. By the time Matthew wrote this Gospel, the city of Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Roman army.

Either way, this parable tells of the goodness of God, providing a banquet, celebrating of the most wonderful life. And the tragedy of people who say: No, we don’t want that life. We don’t want to share your celebration. We don’t belong to you. We will not come and share in your wedding. We will not share in the relationship of joy that is faith in Jesus Christ.

But now there is something totally unexpected.

The father sends the servants out again, out into the streets and the laneways, out to find the people who are poor and struggling. He sends his invitation to people who never, ever thought that they would be invited to this wedding banquet.

Jesus says that the servants were told to bring in all the people they could find, *both bad and good.* So it was not a question of who deserved to be invited.

Here we see a picture of the grace of God. God’s invitation to come and share his life and salvation is an invitation to all people, an invitation that reaches far beyond who we think should be invited, who we think is worthy to be invited.

This story reminds us that none of us deserve to be invited into the life that God gives. God has gone out to find us wherever we are. It is not a question of how good or bad we are. None of us deserve the invitation.

We come only because God has come to us with his grace, with his love, with the undeserved privilege – God wants us to share in his life. God wants us to celebrate with our Lord Jesus Christ.

But there is one more twist. The father goes into the banquet hall and mingles with the guests. There he sees one guest who is not dressed in wedding clothes, in clothes that are appropriate for a royal celebration.

He has this guest thrown out, thrown into the outer darkness of wailing and moaning. Which is the Bible’s way of speaking about an existence without the life of God, an eternal punishment.

It sounds strange, after such a wonderful invitation. Why was he dressed so poorly? Why was he treated so harshly? It is not because this person was dragged in off the street, and could not be expected to dress up for the occasion.

The point Jesus is making here, is that the only way we can come into the presence of God, the only way we can share in the joy and life of our Saviour, is through the grace of God.

God gives grace. God clothes us, wraps us up in his forgiveness. To be there without wedding clothes means to come and to still ignore and refuse the grace of God. Which is an insult to God and a rejection of the grace of God. Which places us again under the judgement of God, and outside his life.

Our Lord invites us to celebrate with him, to share in his life, the life of sins forgiven and fellowship with our God and Lord.

We live a life of celebration. We express this relationship with our God in a special way when we come to worship. Here we are with God. Here we receive from God. Here we celebrate the grace of God. Here we even taste the banquet of God, as we receive the life-giving food and drink of Christ giving himself to us.

Here we rejoice, and we take that joy with us. Here we look forward to the eternal feast, the heavenly feast, where we share in the perfect joy of life with our God. Amen.