

WEEK 4: FRIDAY

'Get me to the church on time!' It's a famous song from a famous musical. I suspect it's a favourite because we've all been to weddings, we all remember the sense of occasion, of dressing up, of this being the bride's and the groom's big day and everyone wanting to be there on time in proper order to give them an occasion to remember. Even in our own day in the western world, where marriage has been knocked about so much by careless pseudo-morality, and the divorce rate has risen alarmingly, almost everybody knows in their bones that this is some- thing to celebrate, something to do properly.

In the ancient world, especially in the ancient Jewish world where the sense of family had remained very strong, this was even more so. And if the king himself had invited you to the wedding of his son . . . well, then you would be planning for months what to wear, what gift to bring, how to make sure everything was right on the day.

All this only heightens the sense of shock, disappointment and anger at the story Jesus now tells. He exaggerates the detail to make it lurid, almost surreal. The guests, finally summoned, beat up and kill the slaves sent with the invitation, and the king sends troops to burn their city. But then comes the second shock. The king sends out some more slaves, and invites all and sundry to come to the party. In they come, 'good and bad' alike (there are echoes here of the 'good and bad' fish found in the Great Net of 13.48). Clearly the larger implications of the parable are influencing quite dramatically the way the original story is being told.

The new guests may have made it on time, but they are not all properly dressed. Here again the story has taken a lurid turn. One guest has not put on the wedding robe, and is thrown into the outer darkness. By this stage it's clear that, as with Psalm 23 which we looked at last Sunday, the original picture has more or less disappeared, and we are left with a more direct statement. The king has now invited the whole world to the wedding party originally planned for Israel. But those who attend as part of this suddenly enlarged guest-list must take care to turn up in the proper outfit.

We should not be surprised that some people have tried to suggest that Jesus never told this parable, or that this last bit was added later on. You can go to extraordinary lengths to protect your image of the gentle Jesus who wouldn't hurt a fly. But what he is saying, as he does in one way or another throughout, is that just because God's wedding party has been thrown open to all and sundry — to Gentiles as well as Jews, as Paul never tired of insisting — that doesn't mean that once they've accepted the invitation they can carry on as though it wasn't God's wedding party. All are welcome; but all must dress appropriately.

TODAY

Almighty Father, give us the joy of accepting your invitation, and the wisdom to dress in the right way for the party.