

St Mary Magdalene's Anglican Church
Moore Street, Adelaide

Reflection for the 19th Sunday after Pentecost

Respectability, fallibility and judgment

When we read or hear the parable of the man invited to a wedding, but punished for not wearing a suitably festive robe, how do we imagine the “wedding garment” which becomes crucial in the parable?

There was a time when the clothes you wore to church were very important. Much of this importance lay in respectability. It was very bad form to arrive at church on Sundays dressed casually or arguably shabbily. I wonder how all that preoccupation with outward appearance began. When was it that respectability became a hall mark of a good churchgoer? These days we think it is important to be at church regardless of one's attire. Nevertheless, most of us take some care over what we shall wear to church. We are, after all, coming to a Service which will invite us into the very presence of God.

It is instinctive to be well presented when we are intending to meet someone of high significance to us. This instinct is fine. A possible wrongdoing over dress is to be adversely critical of someone who may not have taken much trouble over their attire.

So when the king, the host of the wedding banquet, issued his invitations to the noble people in his court the invitees may immediately have wondered what they might wear to the occasion. There is nothing wrong about this. The wrongdoing was the disdain some of them showed towards the invitation itself.

Those of us who are baptised and confirmed receive a standing invitation to the Mass where we enter a Holy Communion with Jesus. In times past people may have regarded the invitation as one to hear teaching and sermons about the right ways to live. Perhaps it was this understanding which bred the notion of respectability. We no longer see churchgoing as requiring the norms of respectability – certainly at St Mary Magdalene's Church.

The question about the wedding garment remains, however. What is it? “Do justly, love mercy; walk humbly with your God.” This is the garment required by God. In other words definite effort put into living the way Jesus taught and showed us during his life in earth. If our efforts are genuine God will be with us as we try and he will understand why we may fail. God knows us only too well. That is a big part of the good news of the Gospel.

Respectability must stand up to the fallible and often harsh judgements of other people. Real efforts to live the way of Jesus are subject to the judgement of God who is infinite in mercy.

Fr Graeme Kaines