

Remade: Matthew 22:1-14

## **When early Christians saw the word *robe*, they thought of one thing only.**

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [October 7, 2008](#) issue

Everyone thinks it's a good idea to make a difference. Making a difference is the stuff of commencement addresses, strategic plans, electoral manifestos, boardroom platitudes.

But making a difference is, to say the least, an underexamined conviction. Would any difference do? Hitler made a big difference, but no one is commending him for doing so. The armies that invaded Iraq in March 2003 made a difference, but it's still not clear whether this difference has been a positive one. Clearly "making a difference" means more than narcissism—more than leaving one's mark on the world in such a way that no one for centuries afterward could possibly miss it.

Making a difference is really a code term, a shorthand way of saying, "There are a host of class, race and gender inequalities in the world, and there's clearly something amiss with the climate, the oceans, the forests and the diminishment of species, and, even though we all have our own careers and the bottom line to attend to, it's good to pay attention and maybe give something back in a way that addresses this distressing context." The world has a myriad of problems to be fixed, and while we all have a lot on our plate, it's good to take time, occasionally or often, to fix a few of them.

Did Jesus make a difference? By these criteria it's not clear that he really did. The healings would probably qualify, although the exorcisms are a little unfashionable. The disciple formation might slip in as grassroots organizing. But the whole Jerusalem thing was evidently not thought through.

Matthew, on the other hand, paints the whole story on a much larger canvas. Jesus is the son whose father is a great king. That king held a banquet to celebrate his son's wedding. Matthew's Gospel portrays Jesus as single, and his singleness is part

of the tension in the plot. Whom will Jesus “marry”? When will the marriage take place? Whom will he invite?

Matthew foresees that the marriage feast isn’t going to be a conventional one. After all, the people originally invited weren’t interested. Some went about their business while others attacked and even killed those who brought the invitations. This is beginning to sound uncomfortably like Israel’s response to God and the prophets. The king destroys their city, just as Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 CE. A whole bunch of other people are invited to the banquet, just as the gentiles flooded the church. (Anyone looking for supersessionist tendencies in Matthew has plenty to go on here: the word for “gathered” is *synegagon*—suggesting the church as the new synagogue.) And these new people include the bad as well as the good.

So far, so affirming; so inclusive, so reassuring of the church’s self-image. Israel was terrible, we’re terrific. But one of the guests, it turns out, isn’t wearing a wedding garment. He is not only shown the door, but receives the full gnashing of teeth and outer-darkness treatment. This seems downright unfair. He is probably poor, and certainly was not expecting a wedding invitation. Matthew is shaking the complacency of the gentiles, and reminding them that the same expectations that have always been made of the Jews will henceforth be made of them too. Salvation isn’t a shoo-in.

The wedding garment has proved troubling to every generation of interpreters. Augustine saw it as love; Luther unsurprisingly derided those who saw it as anything other than faith; Calvin tweaked it to mean both faith and works. In recent centuries a common theme has been that wealthy men of the time would provide suitable garments for their dining guests. This last interpretation, like “the Eye of the Needle was a gate in Jerusalem,” belongs in the trash can of self-serving historical selectivity.

In the early centuries of the church, Christians had less difficulty with the interpretation. When they heard the word *robe*, they thought of one thing: the baptismal robe. Baptism meant not just a ceremony with words and water, but also a new social location and putting the rest of one’s life in jeopardy in order to enjoy being at the wedding banquet. If you weren’t prepared to take steps to show that being at that banquet meant everything to you, then you’d best not be there.

In other words, making a difference has a particular connotation for Christians. It doesn't mean that God is overwhelmed and we ought to give up a bit of our spare time to help out God's divine action in the world. It means that God has already made the difference that matters in Christ, and the crucial way we respond is to allow ourselves to be made different by that crucial difference. Baptism is the definitive moment when Christians say, "I am allowing myself to be made different by the difference made by Christ." Gandhi's much-quoted expression "Be the difference you want to see in the world" may be a cliché, but it takes us close to the heart of the wedding-garment conundrum.

The robe signifies baptism. Baptism signifies not making a difference, but being made different, being remade, being reshaped in accordance with the difference made by Christ. Simply seeking to make a difference in the world without first allowing oneself to be made different may be little more than respectable narcissism. The banquet is for people who know that the question that really matters is, "Have you been made different? Have you allowed Jesus to make a difference in you?"