

The Great Banquet

Stories along the Way: A Sermon on Luke 14:15-24

It's the new year and you're going through your emails when your eyes alight on an email sent to you by an old friend in November. You remember they'd been planning a trip to Hobart in early January, and that you'd agreed to meet up at the Botanical Gardens on the ... wait a minute, what was that date again? In a panic, you scan through your emails trying to work out when it was that you'd agreed to meet. Could it be that the date's already passed?

Let's pray: Heavenly Father, please help us to hear your Word to us this morning both as those who need to respond to your invitation for ourselves, and as those who pass that invitation on to others. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Those of you joining us for the first time this week may not be aware that last week we began a fresh sermon series at St George's entitled 'Stories along the Way'. The series is going to look at most (though not all!) of the stories, or parables, as the Gospels call them, that Luke records Jesus sharing along the road from Galilee in the north, to Jerusalem in the south. This section of Luke's Gospel stretches all the way from v. 52 of chapter nine to v. 27 of chapter nineteen, and it represents Luke's most striking development of the structure he inherited from the older Gospel of Mark. It also contains some of Jesus' most famous teaching, often given in the form of parables, or stories. Last Sunday Vic shared with us a sermon on the Parable of the Good Samaritan. This Sunday we'll be studying Jesus' Parable of the Great Banquet.

This will be a sermon in three parts. In the first part, we'll be talking about banquets: we'll be looking briefly at the occasion which prompted Jesus' story, before looking at the setting of the story itself, and then at the religious connotations of banquets for Jews in Jesus' day. In Part Two, we'll be looking at the master's first invitation and the reception it meets with from those he invited, and in Part Three we'll look at the second and third rounds of invitations that the servant delivered after the failure of the first. Let's dive in!

PART ONE

On Banquets

Jesus tells a story about a meal while having a meal himself. In v. 1 of chapter 14, Luke tells us that Jesus has gone to the house of a prominent Pharisee, where he has been invited for a meal. It's the Sabbath, and Jesus has made a reputation for himself as someone who would heal on the Sabbath, the Jewish day of rest. These healings of Jesus' had created fierce controversy among the devout Jews who saw them: were they a form of work, and, by extension, something that ought not to be done on the Jewish day of rest? Many Pharisees took the view that they were, and so when Jesus goes to a Pharisee's house, conscious that he is being closely watched, only to have placed in front of him a man suffering from a physically deforming illness, he may well have suspected a ruse. The man, surely, is a plant, whose presence at the meal is designed to place Jesus in a compromising position, although no doubt the man himself was also embarrassed to have his painful and humiliating condition being made the opportunity to score a theological point. Jesus' subsequent miracle and the questions with which he buttresses it reduce his fellow guests to a sullen silence.

The meal lurches from one awkward interaction to another. Seeing the guests picking out for themselves places of honour at the table where they are to eat, Jesus tells them that in the banquet which God is preparing for his people at the end of time, many who are first in this life will find themselves last, while many of the last will find themselves first.

Now, Jesus' understanding of the end of history as a banquet prepared by God for his faithful people derives from Old Testament passages like the one we had read for us earlier from the Book of Isaiah and was a common way of talking about the end of time in the Judaism of Jesus' day. The imagery of the banquet is then picked up by Jesus' anonymous companion in v. 15, who remarks, 'Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.' Jesus responds by telling the assembled guests his Parable of the Great Banquet.

We often think of Jesus' parables as pieces of timeless wisdom, giving insight into unchanging spiritual realities. This is because we often read them independently of the contexts in which the Gospel writers have placed them. But when we read them in context we see how often they functioned as weapons in a war of words: just such a thing is happening here, too. To see how this works, we need to turn to the story itself. Read with me, then, from v. 16:

Jesus replied, 'A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, "Come, for everything is now ready."

The host in Jesus' story follows the contemporary practice of first issuing a written invitation well in advance of the day itself, then following this up with an oral reminder delivered by a servant on the day of the banquet itself. The accent in Jesus' story falls on the fact that the day of the banquet is now at hand (in fact, the Greek uses the word 'hour', not 'day'). Jesus viewed his ministry as an inbreaking of God's heavenly end-time kingdom into the earthly world of first-century Palestine. He and his disciples were known for their eating and drinking, which in Jesus' mind served to highlight for his contemporaries that in his own person God's end-time reign had actually begun. Jesus' fellow-guests in Luke 14 no doubt thought of God's end-time kingdom as still to come; Jesus is gently implying through the 'now' in this story that thanks to his presence among them it is already at the door.

The take home for us is to hear that 'Come, for everything is now ready!' with the urgency Jesus puts into it: now is not the time to be penning RSVPs; it's time to be putting on your party clothes and getting into the car! Jesus' point, I suppose, is that while many Pharisees had begun living with a great desire to see God's kingdom come with power, as time went on they became side-tracked by other, seemingly related things, whether that was fine distinctions in the Law of Moses (was it, or wasn't it, 'work' to heal on the Sabbath?) or just chasing after the esteem of the people in whose circles they moved. And what about us? Well, most Christians find that while it's easy to say 'yes' to Jesus at some point in our lives, it's actually quite hard to live out the rest of our lives with the same passion for him with which we began living for him, however many years ago. How do you go on living for Jesus with the same urgency with which you started? Hold on to that question, and I'll have a go at answering it towards the end of the sermon!

PART TWO

The First Invitation and its Reception

Let's take up the parable again from v. 18. Jesus continues,

'But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, "I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me."

'Another said, "I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out."

'Still another said, "I just got married, so I can't come."

Presumably, at the time they received the master's first, written invitation, all these men had responded with a "Thank you for your invitation. Yes, I will certainly come!" When the day of the banquet dawns, however, all of them find excuses for no longer being able to attend. How are we as readers meant to feel about the excuses they offer? On the one hand, there's nothing particularly heinous about the activities they've undertaken: work and marriage are obviously good things to be engaged in. But on the other hand, none of these tasks seem especially urgent, do they? Surely the field and the oxen can wait a day before being inspected, and one can be married just as well at a party as anywhere else. Actually, the flimsiness of the excuses offered is at best thoughtlessly rude, and at worst a calculated insult to the man whose invitation they'd previously been only too happy to accept.

Again, it's helpful at this point to remember that Jesus is telling this particular story for the benefit of the guests assembled at the Pharisee's house, who not long before had orchestrated the rather distasteful stunt with the man suffering from swelling. They claim to be awaiting with eagerness the coming of God's kingdom, but when God's designated king arrives they fail to see the significance of the miracles themselves, which point to the inbreaking of that kingdom, and focus in on a disputed interpretation of the Old Testament Law instead.

The question for us is: have we allowed ourselves to get distracted? Now, in my albeit limited experience, the key moments for us when we're at risk of becoming distracted occur around transition points in our life, say the transition from singleness to marriage, or from marriage to singleness, from study to full-time work, or from work to retirement, from childlessness to having children. When you realise you're heading into a major point of transition, it's well worth seeking out the experience of Christians who've done whatever it is that you're just about to do. Ask them questions, like: How did writing a PhD impact upon the way you lived out your faith? What were the challenges and blessings that came with retirement? How did you persevere at church when your kids were small? If you got stuck in a rut, how did you get out of it? It's worth remembering that distractions come in both delightful and less delightful forms: a brilliant career, an exhausting internship; a child so beautiful you can't seem to focus on anything else, a child that never lets you sleep; a stimulating marriage, a disappointing one. So remember to ask your friends how they coped with their successes, as well as with their failures.

PART THREE

A Second and a Third Round of Invitations

Well, faced with a chorus of such lame excuses, the master of the house is understandably put out. Read with me from v. 21:

“The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, “Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.”

““Sir,” the servant said, “what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.”

“Then the master told his servant, “Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.””

The food is cooked, and it would be a shame to let it go to waste. The master instructs his servant to go out into the town with an invitation for those who through disability are most likely to be left with nothing to do in the middle of the day: the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. Turning again to the context in which Jesus is speaking, the assembled guests listening to his story would presumably think of people just like the man suffering from swelling whom Jesus had healed only a short time earlier. Those on the guest list spurn their invitation; the second round of invitations is addressed to those who live on the margins of society. Jesus’ story implicitly groups his listeners with the first group, and associates the man whom he has healed with the second. And in doing so Jesus is really just making explicit something that had characterised his ministry from the beginning: relatively few of Israel’s religious elite found his message or his person attractive; his appeal was rather to the marginal in Israel: the sick, the poor, the shunned.

But there is still room, as the servant points out to his master, who therefore sends him out into the country roads and hedgerows to bring in whoever he can find. For Luke’s readers this would certainly have called to mind the Christian mission to non-Jews that had gathered such momentum by the time Luke wrote his Gospel late in the first century AD. But it’s also worth saying that even for Jesus’ first hearers, it would have called to mind the end-time ingathering of nations that features in Old Testament passages such as Isaiah 55, which we had read for us this morning. There, the prophet spoke of a future ruler to whom the nations would come running, and it’s likely that in his picture of the master of the house in this Parable, inviting in random strangers gathered from the country roads and lanes, Jesus had passages such as Isaiah 55 in mind.

So what's the continuing appeal and value of this parable for us? Well, firstly and most obviously, it teaches us thankfulness. Because the vast majority of us here this morning are not Jews belonging to the first and second rounds of God's invitation to enter his kingdom, but random strangers gathered in the master's house in a last, determined flurry of offers despatched just as the feast is about to begin.

In the second place, the passage teaches us that God wants his house to be full. It's not saying that everyone will wind up banqueting with God on the last day, regardless of how they've responded to God's invitation – how could it, given the way that it ends? – but it is saying that God's salvation when we experience it will be breathtaking in its scope. People from every nation, and every station will be there – even Tasmanians!

And finally, the parable teaches us to be bold in inviting others into God's kingdom. The feast is already prepared! In the same way, Jesus has already done everything needed for us to enter into God's kingdom: he has broken the power of sin by dying the death we ought to have died; he's broken the power of death by rising to new life. All the guests had to do was come. As the prophet put it:

Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters;
and you who have no money, come buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.
Listen to me, and eat what is good,
and you will delight in the richest of fare.

And, to return to the question I posed earlier in this sermon, these three implications of the Parable of the Great Banquet will also be what helps us to retain the joy that many of us will have experienced when we first became Christian. Firstly, remember that feeling you had when you first realised that God's kindness was being extended not just to people in general, but to you, yes, you! Secondly, remember that God's salvation is so much bigger and grander than we will ever really be able to fathom. And lastly, remember that the feast is cooked and the table is set: All we – all anyone needs to do – is come.

Let's stand and sing.