

## 19<sup>th</sup> April 2020 10am You are invited – but will you accept the invitation? (Luke 14:15-24) – Andrew Attwood

What I'm wanting to talk about this morning is probably a slightly different take on this parable than the usual one. I think, personally speaking, whenever I've read this in the past, I've always thought about it evangelistically as a kind of opportunity to describe how people come into the Kingdom in the first instance, and how that all works and how we're meant to invite lots of people. But to some extent, I want this parable to be addressed to the *church*, to address this parable to people who already are followers of Jesus Christ. It's worth noting that when we talk about the context, Jesus is eating with Pharisees, Jesus is at table with Pharisees. And this one of them says, "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the Kingdom of God."

There was an expectation amongst the Pharisees, that there would be some marvellous moment in the *future* where everything's going to be dandy, everything's going to be great, everything's going to be full of joy. And yet, these men were sat around Jesus, who had just healed someone in the very presence of them eating, the very presence of their meal, and yet they're still not seeing what Jesus is bringing to them in the *present*, never mind into the future. The Pharisees understand that it's coming, but they don't recognise what is in front of them.

Jesus, you see, was modelling the Kingdom to everybody who he was with. And he wanted to communicate it in such a way that people would recognise this is utterly wonderful. This is absolutely marvellous. This isn't something frowning or sober or depressing. This is something that brings absolute joy. Now with that in mind, I wonder what your attitude is to special occasions, to special events, to meals? How do you respond if you get an invitation to a meal? Lindsey and I, we happened to be on a Zoom [videoconference] on Friday evening and it was a Zoom tea time. A dinner time with three other families that we know really well from Derby, people who we've grown up with, people that we all went through our early years of marriage and having kids with and so, on the screen while we were all eating tea, we all had meals together, and we were all chatting and catching up. It's the first time we've seen some of them for quite a while. And it was great. It was really good. And Lindsey began the whole thing and I was there with her to start with, I had to leave for another meeting and then come back. We were on screen for about three hours catching up with these people that we love. And it was so wonderful to be with people eating together. What's your own heart when it comes to connecting to someone who beckons you in to something to celebrate? Is it something that you're comfortable with? Or is it something that you've longed for?

Surprisingly, in this parable, you have this massive banquet that is being put on, this splendid occasion. And all that happens is a series of excuses from the people who are invited. And their excuses are [in] three particular categories. The first person says that he's bought a field and they need to go and check it out. And he needs to go and review what the field's like. "I must go and see the field, please excuse me." He's more bothered about his *possessions* than going to the banquet, he's more bothered about what he *has* than who's inviting him. Then you got a second excuse: "I bought five oxen and I need to try them out. I need to get them going." Someone who's focused on their *work* life, someone who's focused on *doing*, their sense of purpose, their sense of self-justification perhaps, is wrapped up in what they've gotten, how they can use it and how they can earn and how they can build that sense of identity, an identity around what is actually coming into them through their own efforts. And then you've got this third excuse where someone says, "I can't come because I've just got married." In other words, their focus is on their *relationships*. Their focus is on their key relationships because that's where they find their sense of *love*. That's where they find their sense of meaning, in their human relationships. Now, all

these things are good things: possessions aren't bad. work isn't bad, and relationships certainly aren't bad. But compared to an invitation to a banquet from the local Master, these good things are actually bad excuses, they're bad excuses because they basically made people separate from the very one who is inviting them into something more, into something richer, into something deeper.

Just have a think about this: what happens when you do go to a meal that someone else has put on, what happens when you do go to an event that someone has laid on for you? You're not working. You haven't earned it. You're going there simply gratis, it's an entirely free invitation, it's something where you simply are to receive. Why this inclination to back off, and just explore that in a little while, but just to stay with the story of the parable, it's clear that the Master of the house when he hears the news about these excuses, he goes completely unilateral. He's angry. He's fed up, and so he sends His servants out to people who will come, "Go into the highways and byways, go and find the poor, go and find the lame. Go and find the people who aren't usually invited. We *will* have a full house. We *will* have people who are going to be with me to celebrate and enjoy this banquet. In other words, the Master sends His servants out to find people who know their need, who know that what they have is inadequate, what they're going through is inadequate, in contrast to the people who thought they were okay, people whose lives are full of other things. It's an interesting thought, because even at this stage of the parable, the Master is making a distinction between the first invites and the new invites.

Remember the context: Jesus is sat in a meal with Pharisees, he is sat in a meal with religious people. How does this apply to ourselves? Remember, I'm trying to address this parable to the church, to Christians like you and me. To what extent have we recognised in our current context an invitation from Jesus to go deeper? To what extent in this context have we recognised an opportunity to feast? Because circumstances are new. This is the first time in living memory that we in the West are effectively compelled to stay home. The first time in living memory. This is the first time many of us are compelled to, perhaps some of us, do less or stop, change behaviour, pause in some kind of way. I'm guessing some of you will have noticed changes even around us: the roads are quieter, the streets have fewer people in. Have you noticed birdsong for the first time? You'll have heard in the news that places like Venice have clean, crystal-clear water for the first time, in years, in decades. Natural changes are clues that things have changed. But what are we doing in the midst of all of this? One of the things that was interesting, talking to our friends from Derby on Friday night, was how much time some of their kids, their teen, 20-year old kids are spending online. Some of the lads in particular like video games, *Call of Duty*, hours and hours of *Call of Duty*, because they've got nothing else to do. So they're going to play games on screen. They're going to play and they're going to occupy themselves, they're going to distract themselves with hours and hours of entertainment. We might smile about that as older adults because we're not doing that. But what are we doing? What are we doing as we head into week five of lockdown to distract ourselves from our circumstances. Maybe some of us are still throwing ourselves into work. Maybe some of us are clearing the garage, sorting the garden, doing those jobs that need to have been done, and some of that is good. Some of those things are good things to do.

But as we've heard from this parable, it's possible that there are some good things that can be bad distractions from the main thing. Remember Roald Dahl's famous children's book, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*? The golden ticket, that rare ticket that was given out to just a few. And when the world realised there was an invitation into the Chocolate Factory, they went crazy looking for the golden ticket. Yeah, here we are, in 2020 in the West, perhaps distracting ourselves with other things? When there's an invitation behind all of this, there's an invitation to Christians to draw nearer to God, towards a banquet.

One of the things I've wondered about this week was the degree to which Christians, including myself, actually believe that there is a banquet to step towards, that there is really something rich and good and deep to step towards. Do you believe there's a banquet? Have you been disheartened perhaps by attempts in the past to draw near to God and you're not sure how to get there, how to do it or what to do? You know, maybe some of us are still sincerely keeping our Bible reading going or prayer times or whatever. But that's still not quite what I'm talking about from this parable. Jesus is describing a feast, is describing the feast of the kingdom of God, that the Pharisees were saying was in the future, and for sure, there's going to be a beyond-comprehension feast in the future. But what about the feast in the present? Because Jesus is present.

I just want you to have a moment of quiet, just at this point, to honestly name your own distractions. What is it? Your usual set of excuses that distracts you from turning yourself towards God? I'm not talking about "I've done my quiet time, I've done my Bible reading. I'm fine." I'm talking about distractions from God. At a heart level, just have a think. What do you go to? What do you flit around that distracts you from God? What is it?

Even name the good things, the good things that can distract you. What I want you to do is to realise that God is going to have his way. The Master in this parable, when he gets lots of excuses from the first people, he doesn't stop the banquet, which is going to go ahead. He says, we're just going to go find the people who recognise that they need it. I want to put it to you that in this unusual time, this peculiar time, where we're in lockdown, there is going to be a banquet laid out by God, for those who recognise that their need of it. And he's sending out invitations. And it may even be this morning, as we're thinking about this parable that you're recognising, you've heard it and received the invitation from God. What are we going to do about the invitation?

I just want to spend a moment of time in prayer now, that God would open up the eyes of our hearts to see what it is he has for us. So can we just pray for a moment? Maybe just have a moment of stillness.

Holy Spirit would you bring to light now, the reality of the feast of the Kingdom of God that is present in Jesus Christ that is available to anyone who recognises their need of it. Come Holy Spirit, Open our eyes, open our heart.

I want to pray, Holy Spirit, that you would stir us at our deepest level. Help us remember how superficial some things are, that we give our time to. How unhelpfully distracting some things are, even essential things sometimes, when we know that there is a voice calling us to come aside and to be with you. Holy Spirit, wake us up at a deeper level.

And I want to pray, Lord, that we would begin to recognise that this is a formative moment in our lives. This is not simply an interruption that we need to get through and then get back to normal. I want to pray, Holy Spirit, that you would open the eyes of our heart, to recognise that you want to do something significant through this with us, at our deepest level.

Lord Jesus, would you set before your church the riches of the kingdom of God. Show us your love. Show us your face. Touch us with your joy. Open our eyes to see.

And I want to pray, Father God, would you reveal Jesus again to us in a way that the Pharisees couldn't see? Open our eyes to see Jesus, because Jesus is the feast. Jesus is the real feast.

So I just want to conclude there. I'd encourage you to go back to this passage, Luke 14, starting at verse 15. Read it again, and read it again. And maybe read it again and use it as a way of saying, "Lord, I want to take up the invitation.

I want to lay aside even my good excuses. I want to draw near into deeper things with you."

Okay.

[Andrew Attwood]

[Transcribed by <https://otter.ai> with help from Hamish Blair]