

"Big News for Busy People"

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Date: 06 March 2011

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[0 : 0 0] The reading is from Luke chapter 14, it's verses 15 to 24. When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God.

But he said to him, A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, Come, for everything is now ready.

But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, I've bought a field and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused. And another said, I've bought five yoke of oxen and I go to examine them.

Please have me excused. And another said, I have married a wife and therefore I cannot come. So the servant came and reported these things to his master.

Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame. And the servant said, Sir, what you commanded has been done and still there is room.

[1 : 1 1] And the master said to the servant, Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.

Well, thanks for reading. And I'll be referring to that reading throughout the talk. So if you could just keep your hand out there and we'll look at it together.

Now, the law firm that I used to work for, they used to have a corporate social responsibility policy, which basically means they encourage you as one of their workers to go and help with things in the community in your free time.

And what used to happen was there was a really nice girl called Florence who used to organise it. And she would email round with opportunities for us to go and help with various things, either using our legal skills or just doing something more practical in the community.

But when Florence was particularly desperate for someone to help, because people were very busy and couldn't do it, she used to sometimes put at the bottom of her emails about these opportunities, if you do this, you will get to heaven.

[2 : 1 8] Now, I'm absolutely not having a go at Florence about this. It was obviously just quite a playful thing to put at the end of the email. But I just wondered if that was an example of, well, symptomatic really, of a certain complacency that we have in our society about whether or not you'll get to heaven.

As if at the pearly gates, when you die, there's this kind of bar set. And the bar isn't very high. You know, kind of as long as you've done your bit here and there, and being quite a good person, you'll be fine.

You'll get into heaven. If you've done your corporate social responsibility, you'll get to heaven. I don't know what you think about that. The truth is, it is something that we have to have worked out, isn't it?

Because one day, we are all going to die. It's the only certainty in life. The statistics say 100%. And so we need to think about what will happen next.

And certainly, people disagree on that. There are people who feel very differently about what will happen when we die. There are people who think very differently about it. And so there's no use just trusting our instincts about it.

[3 : 30] We need help from somebody who knows what will happen when we die. And so that's why we're turning to this story told by Jesus. Because he knew what would happen.

So he told this story to help us understand what will happen after we die. And before we dive in, it's just worth saying that we are dealing with actual history here. This is a first century account by a doctor called Luke, who'd interviewed eyewitnesses to find out what happened in Jesus' life.

Now, if that's an issue for you, you can chase it up with further reading. And I'd be happy afterwards to point you to places. But we can be confident that this is what actually happened. And so we can put ourselves back at the scene when Jesus was there.

There's a dinner party. And before we've actually, the bit that we've had read out, what's happened until that time is that at the dinner party, Jesus has started teaching. And he's been quite challenging to the people at the dinner.

And so it's a bit like, you know, if you're at a dinner party and someone says something quite controversial, it gets a bit awkward in the atmosphere. And so the person who pipes up at the beginning of our reading, it's a kind of clear the air moment.

[4 : 36] He's trying to lighten the mood. And so he says, Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God. Now, the reason why that might lighten the mood is that the dinner party is full of religious people.

So the guy thinks, this is a pretty safe bet. If I just say, look, we're all going to be pretty happy if we get to go to heaven. This word kingdom of God, it's his way of describing where God is.

It's what we think of as heaven. So when he says it, he thinks, we'll all be all right. We'll all be happy. We're going to heaven. And I think that's the sort of complacency that we encounter today.

Do you not think that's right? We're complacent about it. We think, well, some people in the world can be quite unpleasant. We'll grant that. But actually, generally, we're all a pretty good bunch, aren't we?

We'll be there. Well, then Jesus tells this story. And when you reflect carefully on it, it is a remarkable story. There are three quite striking shocks in it.

[5 : 39] So we're going to look at those three shocks. The first one is that heaven is like a banquet. If you have a look with me at what happens next, I'm going from verse 16, so that's small number 16. But Jesus said to him, Jesus says that heaven is like a banquet.

And the reason that's a shock for us today, I think, is because it's so different from what we think about heaven. I mean, just think about it. If I just say the word heaven to you, what comes into your mind?

Clouds, harps, white nighties, and Philadelphia cheese. And we just don't fancy it. I mean, if you think about it, I was thinking how if one of your mates says to you, do you want to go out for a drink, a beer, or a glass of wine together, how many of you actually say that would be heaven?

We don't say that. We tend not to, because we don't really think of heaven as really that good. So we think that deep down, there's a part of us that thinks that actually heaven is going to be quite boring.

But Jesus is the man who knew what heaven will be like. And so what we learn is that the real story about heaven couldn't be more different. He says, picture a lavish banquet.

[7 : 04] Jesus is hosting a big party, an amazing party, and we're invited. So just think about the food. In fact, why don't we all, look, close your eyes if you like.

But you don't have to close your eyes. But I thought, let's just take a moment to think. The creator of the whole world is having a dinner party. For you, what's on the menu? What are you going to eat?

Okay, let's come back to Earth. I've planned mine. I don't know what you're going to have. But let me tell you what I'm having.

I'm starting with pressed terrine with some smoked duck. And then my first course, I'm having a couple of main courses actually. My first main course is roasted loin of Highland venison with smoked chestnut puree and loads of gravy.

And if I've still got room, I'm having a Cornish rack of lamb with Provencal vegetables and thyme juice. And then for dessert, I don't know what you're thinking, but I'm thinking chocolate, pavlova, banoffee pie.

[8 : 08] It's going to be amazing. But you get the idea. I don't know if you've ever seen those Harry Potter films when they start term at the beginning of school and they sit on these long, bare wooden tables and then suddenly this food appears.

Amazing food. Wow. And bang, the party starts. Jesus is saying, that's the picture. Heaven, it's going to be like a banquet. And of course, banquets aren't just about the food, they're about the people, the company, the friendship.

So I don't know where you most like to relax with friends. Maybe it's in a pub on a summer's day together or maybe a dinner party with friends around and everyone knows each other well and the hours just seem to fly by.

Well, that's the picture. That's what heaven will be like. And so we can see there that our society has got our wires, we've got our wires completely crossed about this.

It's not that heaven is the boring place. It's not that hell will be the place of friendship. There won't be any friends in hell. Hell is the place where everyone's lonely.

[9 : 13] Heaven is the place where the party is going on all day and all night. Heaven is the place of friendship where people can love each other and be themselves and enjoy it. And that fits with everything else the Bible says about heaven.

We're told that there won't be any sickness anymore in heaven. An extraordinary thing. There won't be any death anymore in heaven. It will be this world put right and we can stay there forever.

And as far as the Bible is concerned the highlight of the banquet is the host. It's being with the host. God will be there and we'll be his people. Jesus is the host of the banquet.

So do you see the point there with this picture? Heaven is going to be brilliant. So if a banquet isn't really your scene if you don't really like banquets then it's fine just to think of something that is your scene.

Jesus was picking a picture that would resonate with the people around him. His point is we should all want to be there. And there's something else really important we need to learn from this picture.

[10 : 20] It's that you see when there's a banquet the host pays for the banquet. Jesus is the host. He's like the rich friend who can take you on a luxury holiday and say you don't have to pay anything.

It's all on me. Enjoy yourself. And so you see we've got it wrong. Those emails at the firm I used to work for saying if you do these things you'll get to heaven as if there's a bar that we need to cross.

That's not how heaven's going to work. Heaven is about whether you accept the invitation from Jesus. This is a revelation to me because I used to think that you could sort of rank everybody from like the worst person who's ever lived you might put down here up to the best person who's ever lived up here and there might be a cut off and as long as you've got above the line you get into heaven.

But Jesus you know for Jesus that's just a naive view of what's really going to happen because God's perfect. So if there really was a standard that we could attain the line won't be somewhere in the middle the standard that we need is in the sky.

On our own nobody will get to heaven on the basis of what we've done. We're not even close. And yet Jesus has paid the price so that we can all get there.

[11 : 36] He paid the price when he died on the cross. We know that from elsewhere in what he taught. He was dying on the cross in our place taking the punishment we deserve so that we can go to heaven.

The banquet is on him. So you saw how the host ended his message. He says come for everything is now ready. The invitation goes out and it's come to us this morning in Dulwich.

Heaven is going to be beyond what we can ever imagine. and we've all got the chance to be there. So that's our first point. Heaven is like a banquet.

But after Jesus has set this wonderful scene he drops a bombshell. Our second shock is that some people refuse to come to the banquet. Have a look with me at verse 18.

About five, six lines down. But they all alike began to make excuses. Excuses. Verse 18. And if we have a look at those excuses they're quite similar I think to the excuses people make today to not accept Jesus' invitation.

[12 : 43] If you have a look at the first one still in verse 18 he says I've bought a field and I must go out and see it. So this is a guy who knows the offer that's on the table but he's too preoccupied with his property.

Like one of us whose biggest focus today is our dream home. And if you look at the second one it's that his business has got in the way. He needs to try out his new oxen that he's bought.

Just like the Londoner today perhaps here this morning who again knows what's on the table being offered but their career is just too important for them. And if you look at the third one it's their relationship.

I don't know if you remember that one. He says that he's just got married so he can't come. Like one of us today who's perhaps seen what Jesus offers but because of the impact it would have on a relationship that we're in we're not prepared to accept it.

Now why does Jesus spell out these excuses? Well I think it's because his point is that none of them is actually a very good excuse. They've known about the banquet long in advance.

[13 : 45] They've had save the date invitations. They could have rearranged things and come along. They just don't want to go. And the bottom line is that they're insulting the host.

They don't want to be with the host. That's why they don't want to go. And the hard truth is that here and now in 2011 we do the same. We put off responding to Jesus' invitation because other things are just more important to us.

Perhaps it is that life's just too busy. The job, the kids, the house. Perhaps we give intellectual reasons but we don't really ever take the time really to look into them and find out whether there are answers.

Perhaps it's just more important to us what our mates or our family think. Now of course we are all busy. Of course we're busy. But you see as far as God is concerned these aren't good reasons.

They're not even the real reason. They're excuses. The truth is that we don't want to be with the host. We'd rather do our own thing because accepting this invitation from Jesus would involve changes to our lives and we don't want to change.

[15 : 02] So how does God, the master of the banquet, react? Well have a look down at verse 21. So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry.

The third shock in the story is that Jesus excludes people from his banquet. God is angry. And rightly so I think it's worth saying.

He's made a personal invitation to these people and they've rejected him personally. And it's a shock isn't it? If you look at the last verse in the story the master says not one of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.

So Jesus teaching about what happens when we die is not easy on the ear. Some people real people people like you and me will not be at his banquet.

There will be a place where the banquet is not happening. A place of loneliness and misery and despair. That's the place that Jesus called hell.

[16 : 09] Because God is angry. Now I don't like to say that but we need to hear that because we tend to think it's going to be alright. It'll be alright.

The idea that we'd miss out on something just doesn't really fit with our experience of life. Me and God will come to an agreement. We'll be fine. You know when I was at university I was studying law and we had a partner from a firm in the city came to our college.

He'd been at my college and he said to me basically if you want a job at our firm you'll get one. It'll be fine. You'll be fine. And so I applied. I didn't spend much time on the application form.

Just sent it off. Got my interview. Went down. Didn't do any prep. Didn't learn anything about the firm. Didn't think about what I might be asked. Went to the interviews. And a few days later I got my letter in the post.

And it was a letter of rejection. I hadn't got the job. And I read it and I couldn't believe it. I re-read it and re-read it. There must be a mistake. And you know what? Even then I rang the firm to check.

[17 : 15] It's extraordinary isn't it? Because I'd never missed out on anything. So I thought this can't be right. I'll blag my way in. And then I contacted the partner who told me that I would get this job.

And he rang recruitment and said you've got to give this guy a job. But of course they didn't have to give me a job. I failed the interview so he didn't give me a job. But we think that's how life works.

That we can just blag our way in. Yet how embarrassing to turn up on God's doorstep after we die. expecting that when we're there we'll just be able to strike a deal.

And then finding out it's too late. We can't strike a deal. Going in just thinking God will let me in. I'll just explain to him what my thinking was.

Why I didn't go for the Christianity thing. That's how life works. Only to find that it's not how life works. Because Jesus said that's not how life works. Jesus said not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.

[18 : 16] But don't feel sorry for Jesus and think that his party will be spoiled by people not being there. Have a look with me at what happens next in verses 21 to 23.

The servant came and reported these things to his master. The master of the house became angry and said to his servant go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city and bring in the poor the crippled the blind and lame.

And the servant said so what you have commanded has been done and still there is room. And the master said to the servant go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in that my house may be filled.

Amazing. So there are a few categories of people here and they're all invited in massive numbers to the banquet. And they're the people who for the original heroes these were the unlikely people.

These were the people they would never have imagined would make it to heaven. Jesus says the invitations have gone out to them instead. And I don't know but perhaps this morning that's great news for some of you here because you might have been hearing about this banquet and thinking it sounds amazing but there's a reason why it's not really for me.

[19 : 29] Maybe you think it's compelling but you think well I'm not really a religious person. Jesus says it doesn't matter you've been invited come along anyway. well I hear that but I've done some really bad stuff.

You know I've lived a pretty edgy life. Jesus says it doesn't matter I don't care what you've done just accept my invitation and come to the banquet. Or maybe you're thinking not me I'm a Muslim I'm an agnostic I'm an atheist.

God says just accept your invitation and you can come to my party. It doesn't matter what you've thought about me before if only you'll accept him as God today he'll accept you to his great banquet.

It's really as simple as that and it's an amazing thing. And yet for many people in Dulwich today we will just keep putting off the invitation until it's too late.

Because let's be clear one day it will be too late. The choices we make now we will live with. One day we're all going to die and nobody can make this response for us.

[20 : 37] It's up to us to sort out that invitation and RSVP. So many of us just have other priorities and meanwhile if you look at the world picture across the world in Latin America, in Africa, in Asia, people are accepting this invitation in their droves.

I lived in China for six months in 2004 and people in China are becoming Christians every day. Hundreds and hundreds of people people. They're over the moon because they know what they're like and they can't believe that a man as good as Jesus could invite them to a party as good as this.

It's amazing. And in London we look at that and we rationalise it and we think well maybe they just need something to believe in. But maybe they've just got it right. Jesus is clear here.

The end will come and when it comes nothing else we've ever done will matter. All that will matter is did we RSVP? The banquet is going to be full and it's going to be amazing whether or not you or I am there.

And so I want to urge you with everything I've got to accept the invitation to Jesus' banquet. Remember that picture of what it's going to be like.

[21 : 51] It's going to be wonderful inside. Please let nothing else in your life get in the way. I'm going to stop there and hand back to Mark.

Thank you.