

An invitation you can refuse

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[0 : 00] So this is taken from Luke's Gospel, in the New Testament part of the Bible, Luke was a doctor, and this is what he writes. When one of those who were inclined at table with him, that's Jesus, 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'd been invited, Come, for everything is now ready. But they were all alike and began to make excuses. The first said to him, I bought a field, I must go out and see it, please have me excused. And another said, I bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them, please have me excused.

And another said, I've married a wife, and therefore I can't 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's room. And the master said to the servant, Go out to the highways and the hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled.

[1 : 19] For I tell you, none of those men who are invited shall taste my banquet. Ben, thanks very much indeed. If you haven't got sight of that passage that Ben read, then you can find it on page 41 in the Gospels, if you haven't got sight of that.

Well, you may know this is the first of two talks this week, with the title Finding Certainty in an Uncertain World.

And I guess the fact that our world is full of uncertainty, and increasingly so, scarcely needs to be said. So the election of Donald Trump and the possibility of a new world order.

Brexit. Does that begin a new European political map? Was it simply a blip? Just last month, I was reading that over the next 20 years, something like 35% of jobs in the UK are simply going to vanish, with the advance of artificial intelligence and robots and that kind of thing, and then imagine all the uncertainty that will generate.

But of course, it may well be that you're here this evening, and uncertainty, rather than being that kind of big picture uncertainty, it may actually be that the uncertainty that you feel is much more personal than that.

[2 : 36] Perhaps it's to do with your health, or your family, or your finances, or your children, or your future in some way. Perhaps you're just thinking, I've just reached the stage of life, and I don't really know what is coming next round the corner.

Well, amidst uncertainty, there is nothing more important than being certain about God, and certain where we stand with God. So what we're doing, both today and on Sunday, is we're looking at two of the parables that Jesus Christ told.

They're both from Luke's Gospel, as Ben said earlier. Luke wrote his Gospel, this account of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. He wrote his Gospel to give us certainty and confidence about who Jesus is.

So actually, it's a great place to start. It's a great place from which to explore the Christian faith, and to be certain about where we stand with God.

Because as I said earlier, the important thing is not that we listen to anyone about Jesus, you know, anyone who cares to have an opinion about Jesus. Actually, the important thing is that we listen to Jesus himself.

[3 : 50] So that's why we've had that parable printed, so we can see it on the table. Now, we're in a section of Luke's Gospel that begins a few verses earlier. For those who have got the actual Gospel rather than the paper form, chapter 13, verse 22, we read, Jesus went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying towards Jerusalem.

And someone said to him, Lord, will those who are saved be few? It is a question about certainty. Will those who are saved be few? And then in the passage that was read, we find ourselves at a dinner party.

I suspect slightly grander, perhaps, than this one. It was the establishment were there, the religious establishment were there, the political establishment were there, and they are there to catch Jesus out.

And then verse 15, the very first verse that was read to us, 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.

Now, I don't know what to make of this man. I wonder, in part, whether this was simply the moment when every conversation at the dinner party dried up. I don't think that's happened this evening yet.

[5 : 06] Perhaps it has on your table, I don't know. But there's always someone there, isn't there, who's quick just to say, can you pass the salt, or isn't the weather nice, or isn't the view lovely? And it may be that kind of comment.

Or it may be that actually he's genuinely wanting answers. Well, the parable that Jesus tells in response is about the best invitation you'll ever receive, and the worst excuses you'll ever hear. And there is, I think, a talk outline, is there? So, on the back of the feedback form. So, again, in your little envelopes, there's a feedback form, and there's a talk outline, which just shows you where we're going for the next ten minutes, which you may find helpful to follow.

Scribble notes, anything, doodle on it. So, first of all, the best invitation you'll ever receive. Let me read again verses 16 and 17. But Jesus said to him, A man once gave a great banquet, and invited many.

And at the time for the banquet, he sent his servants to say to those who had been invited, Come, for everything is now ready. The question in verse 15 is about the kingdom of God.

[6 : 16] It's about heaven. And so Jesus uses what to his audience would have been a very familiar picture from the Old Testament, from the first part of the Bible, of heaven as a great banquet.

It's a picture Jesus loved to use. And I guess it's a far cry, certainly from the kind of childhood picture of heaven that I had, you know, kind of sitting on a cloud, strumming a harp, whatever you do with a harp, wearing a white nightie.

I can't think of anything worse, personally. But actually, this is a far more attractive view, isn't it, of heaven. And it's the picture of heaven that Jesus loved to talk about. A banquet.

A wonderful picture of enjoying God's good gifts, enjoying God's creation, and above all, of course, it's relational. It's being in the presence of God himself.

But it is a banquet with a difference. It's a banquet in which death will be swallowed up. And so you'll see there, on the outline, I've put a little quote from the Old Testament, from the prophet Isaiah, in the first part of the Bible, again, which would have been so familiar to Jesus' listeners.

[7 : 28] Let me just read it to us. On this mountain, the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

And he'll swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever. And the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach for his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

Whatever we live for ends in death, doesn't it? It gets all of us. It covers even the greatest of lives.

Perhaps that was one of the shocking things about the last 12 months, the number of celebrity deaths, from David Bowie all the way through to Leonard Cohen, each one dying.

But here is God's wonderful promise, hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus Christ, that one day, death will be swallowed up. No more death, and no more tears, no sickness, no pain, no unhappiness, no loneliness, no disappointment.

[8 : 47] And all because in heaven there will be no sin. Sin is the Bible word which really explains everything that's wrong with our world.

It is what all of us are naturally like as we say to God, I will run my life my own way without you. Now I don't know whether that describes how you think of yourself, but certainly I think that is how I am naturally, what I am naturally like.

And I guess if we're honest it describes all of us as we say, you know, we may believe in God, we may not believe in God. But actually in terms of sort of day-to-day life, then we run life our way without God.

And that I think is the significance here of the fact that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. Because what's going to happen in Jerusalem, well Jesus will be arrested, he'll be crucified, and he'll die on the cross, dying, bearing in himself the punishment for our sin, the judgment that we deserve. And therefore you see it's by dying on the cross that Jesus in a sense unlocks the gate to this wonderful heavenly banquet that the prophet Isaiah spoke about hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus.

[10:05] Which is why I think in verse 17 of our passage Jesus writes himself into the party just as Alfred Hitchcock often gave himself, didn't he, a little walk on part in his films.

Because you see, Jesus is going to his death at which point everything will be ready for the heavenly banquet. everything will be ready for people to be invited into God's kingdom. And therefore all we need to do is to reply to Jesus to accept the invitation and follow him. It really is the best invitation you will ever receive.

Now my wife, Rachel and I went to a banquet a few weeks ago. Before I say anything else, I have to tell you this is not a regular fixture in the sort of dowdy social calendar. But anyway, I'll tell you something about it.

The invitation came in a kind of thick envelope on a sort of card of sort of gilt edging, sort of heavily embossed typeface which seemed to stand about a mile above the card.

[11:11] And it's all very smart indeed. Dress code, definitely black tie. Well, you won't be surprised that actually it took us about half a second to decide that we were going to go.

There was no kind of faffing around, oh yeah, should we go to this one or not? And it was worth it. So it was in the guild hall up in the city and we had drinks, first of all, in the kind of the smaller of the two rooms which was rather the size of a cathedral.

And then we went next door into the great banqueting hall and it was a fantastic occasion. But, the surprise about the banquet in Jesus story is that although it is the greatest invitation you could ever receive, actually those who are invited come up with the worst excuses you'll ever hear.

Now, in the days before refrigeration and supermarkets, you couldn't simply pop in an online order to waitress and expect all your posh party food to be delivered the next day. So in the first century, kind of dinner party etiquette, so to speak, was that you would send out two invitations.

You'd send out your first invitation a long way in advance. People would RSVP. That would give you an idea of the numbers. You'd then kind of organise the catering.

[12:31] You'd kill your fattened calf or whatever it was. You'd organise your catering. And once the food was ready or about to be ready, you'd then send a second invitation which would say, you know, it's now all ready and you can now all come.

And it's at that point that one by one the guests make their excuses. Have a look again at verse 18. But they all alike began to make excuses.

The first said to him, I bought a field and I must go out and see it. Please excuse me. Another said, I bought five yoke of oxen and I'm going to examine them. Please excuse me. And another said, I've married a wife and therefore I cannot come.

Now, a first century farmer would never have dreamt of buying a field without seeing it first. It'd be rather like going on to the Right Move website and clicking on a particular property and buying it, parting with a million pounds, whatever it is, without even going to see it simply on the strength of a few photographs.

Likewise, a first century farmer would not have dreamt of buying any oxen without seeing them. It'd be the equivalent of going on to some dodgy second-hand car dealer website and thinking, yep, I'll buy that one and parting with your cash and taking it for a test drive afterwards.

[13:52] As for the third excuse, I've married a wife. Well, that is the most contrived of all because remember, he'd replied to the first invitation already.

And in a culture where marriage was such a big deal and where it involves so much in terms of preparation, suddenly to announce at two days' notice that actually you can't go to the other thing

because you got married, well, who is going to believe that one?

You see, they really are the worst excuses that you'll ever hear. Which explains, I think, what happens next. So, verse 21, 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 then again, verse 23, 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.

Now, Jesus' listeners would have had no problem working out who this second batch of invitees were. Because they're the ones who would simply never dream, not in their wildest dreams, that such a wonderful invitation could come their way.

[15:17] In fact, they're the very people who the religious establishment of Jesus' day looked down on. Again, if you've got the actual Luke's Gospel rather than the piece of paper, just look on to Luke chapter 15 verses 1 and 2.

Now, the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to him to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, this man receives sinners and eats with them. Jesus, you really shouldn't be mixing with people like this.

So, you see, why does Jesus tell this parable? Well, simply because some things in life really do matter.

if the latest health scare is to be believed, we are no longer allowed to eat roast potatoes. The Food Standards Agency apparently has decreed that some starchy foods such as bread or potatoes when cooked for a long period of time at high temperatures could pose a health risk.

I'm glad that Fiona organising this evening's meal obviously bore this in mind. In fact, there was a great cartoon in one of the papers with a teenager, imagine your teenager, rushing off to a party and just before the teenager left the front door had been cornered by his mother and the mother was giving him strict instructions as mothers do, I think, on these occasions and probably fathers as well along these lines.

[16:49] If someone offers you a roast potato, you know what to do. Well, as I said, I'm glad we haven't had any of those on the menu this evening. But you and I, we are bombarded with warnings all the time.

But Jesus tells us this story because there are some decisions that actually really do matter. And if we turn our back on Jesus' invitation, then we turn our backs on God himself.

It is a parable, isn't it, about the kindness and generosity of God. Remember that question that was asked at the beginning, chapter 13, verse 22, will those who are saved be few?

A parable about the kindness and generosity of God. The invitation goes out to many, but sadly, tragically, many make their excuses.

the reason people don't get to heaven, according to Jesus, is not because God isn't generous, but because people choose not to.

[17:58] They have other priorities. That's why I've called this talk an invitation you can refuse. Well, how does Jesus conclude, verse 24?

For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet. Whose banquet is it? It's Jesus' banquet. The RSVP needs to be to him.

It needs to be on his terms. I think it's a very powerful parable, isn't it? So what about us? Well, there are two groups of people in the parable, and I imagine that those same groups of people will be represented here this evening.

Firstly, there are those who reject the invitation. Because sadly, just as many of the establishment in Jesus' day rejected him, so it's no different today.

The statistics, by all accounts, show that most people in the UK believe that God exists. Most people in the UK believe that things will be absolutely fine when they get to their final destination.

[19:07] But actually they have not RSVP'd. They will simply assume they will get there. They've never responded to Jesus' invitation.

And although of course it's far from fashionable to be a Christian in secular 21st century Britain, far from fashionable to be a follower of the Lord Jesus, the party hasn't been cancelled.

Jesus' invitation is still there for us. So I think it's worth just sopping and thinking, what is preventing us from accepting Jesus' invitation for ourselves?

What are your excuses, if you like? Well, life's so busy. I've got my career to focus on. I've got my family. It's so time-consuming.

And perhaps other excuses as well. Holidays to be enjoyed. There never seems enough time. Life seems to be going well. I've got lots of questions. Not sure if it's true or not.

[20 : 10] Lots of questions I want to think about. What would Jesus say if he was here this evening? Do you think that your excuses are any more credible than those of the people in this parable?

The second group of people are those who never imagined they'd been invited to such a party in the first place. Perhaps you don't regard yourself at all as part of any establishment, let alone the religious establishment.

You know you're far from God, in which case Jesus wants you to know that actually this invitation wonderfully still stands. All the jubilees, carnivals, festivals, of a thousand years and war of history, cannot beat this party that Jesus has planned, the wonder and glory and joy of the celebration which is there in heaven with the creator.

A magnificent occasion beyond human imagination, the joy of being with God, in his presence, at peace with God, forgiven by God, enjoying everything that is good in his presence assured.

And Jesus says everything is ready. He has died on the cross to secure that invitation so that on that day we can stand before God forgiven.

[21 : 46] And admission is free to anyone who will accept the invitation. is it