**Sermon – The Great Banquet (Luke 14:15 – 24) St Paul’s (25.05.2025)**

Question: “Where do significant conversations often take place?” Discuss with your neighbour.

Jesus had significant conversations and controversies around tables over meals. In the parable Luke 14, Jesus addresses one of the major biblical themes, the Kingdom of God. This theme has a long history, going back over 700 years.

The setting for the parable is that Jesus is a guest of a prominent Pharisee probably after synagogue worship on the Sabbath. After healing a person and advising his listeners to invite people who are unable to reciprocate hospitality, one of the guest’s comments, “Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the Kingdom of God.”

This comment is an invitation for Jesus to share his view on the coming Kingdom and the Messiah who will usher the Kingdom in. At the end of history, the final fulfillment of the Kingdom was understood to include a great Banquet with the Messiah.

If Jesus was to follow the thinking of his day, he would be expected to say, “Oh that we might keep the law in a precise fashion so that when that great day dawns, we will be counted worthy to sit with the Messiah and all true believers at his banquet!” The other guests at the meal would approve of such an answer and think to themselves, “He has passed the test.”

The history surrounding the Messianic Banquet goes back to Isaiah 25: 6-9 (read). Here Isaiah dreams of a banquet fit for kings hosted by the Lord. The guests will include peoples from all nations, including the Gentiles. While the guests swallow the rich fare, The Lord swallows up death, tears will be wiped away and it will be the glorious Day of Salvation! This theme has echoes through the New Testament.

Sadly Isaiah’s magnificent vision of God’s vibrant salvation was lost through time. A translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Aramaic around the time of Jesus, had the Lord of hosts preparing a meal for all peoples, it goes on to add that while they supposed this to be an honour, it is really a shame for them, and they will suffer and die from great plagues that will come upon them! Other documents around this time also lose Isaiah’s magnificent vision of faithful Jews and Gentiles celebrating at God’s Kingdom Banquet.

It appears that an invitation to be part of God’s Kingdom Banquet is another image of salvation.

So let us explore in a bit more depth this parable Jesus offered. In a traditional Middle Eastern village, when a master or noble man invites guests to a banquet there are 2 invitations as vs 16 &17 make clear. The first invitation ascertains who can attend. In some ways this is a bit like a present-day invitation to a wedding which requires us to respond: accept with pleasure or decline with regret. As with a wedding, the meal is prepared based on the number of people who have said they will attend. In the M/E, if 2-4 guests agree to attend, then a chicken would be prepared. If more than 35 say “Yes” then a calf would be prepared. There were no refrigerators and so the prepared meat must be eaten on the day it is cooked.

The second invitation, by way of a servant (vs 17), is that all is now ready, and it is time for the guests to come. This would be similar to the host at a wedding inviting the guests to take their seats because the meal is about to be served.

Given the remark that sparked Jesus sharing this parable, it is obvious to all those present that the hour of the Messianic Banquet, the great Banquet at the end of the age, has arrived and it is time for the guests to come and enjoy the fellowship and nourishment of this longed-for event.

But here the parable departs from expectations: Instead of joyful responses from the guests there are excuses. On the surface these excuses appear genuine but on further examination …. Well???

The first person has just bought a field that they have not inspected. In the M/E a farmer will learn everything they can about a piece of land before they purchase it. They will want to know about the quality of the soil, the drainage, whether it faces the winter sun or not (rain in winter and needs to face the sun for crops to grow). The prospective purchaser will want to know the number of wells, any trees present and their age, the quality of any terraces present and the yield of the field over recent years. This purchasing of land can take several months and even years.

Would we purchase a 10-hectare block without inspecting it or knowing anything about it - knowing whether it is hill country or swamp, knowing the soil quality and what direction it faced, knowing the availability of water, its recent productivity and what buildings it had on it?

This excuse given by the first guest for suddenly not attending the banquet, which is now ready, is not an excuse at all, it’s a fabrication!

The second guest also offers an excuse; he has just bought 5 yoke of oxen and must now go and try them out. Every M/E farmer knows that a yoke of oxen is useless unless the animals pull together. Further they would ideally tire at a similar rate. No M/E farmer would buy a pair of oxen without testing them thoroughly and then negotiate the price.

Would we purchase 5 second-hand cars over the phone without any idea of their age, mileage, condition or whether they would even go? Well perhaps a scrap merchant might or someone wanting to build a Hot Rod! The second guest also offers a transparently false excuse!

The third man’s excuse is vulgar and offensive. He has just married a wife and he is busy with her and cannot come! In M/E culture when men speak about their wives they do so in a dignified and respectful manner. Usually, men do not discuss anything of their wives or female children. This man does not even ask to be excused, he just says he cannot come. Even in western culture this excuse would be rude and offensive.

If an urgent matter arises so that one is unable to attend a nobleman’s feast, it is quite possible to offer a genuine and plausible excuse. The excuse would likely contain an apology, including ‘I am very sorry, a matter has come up without warning and I must attend to it immediately. Please accept my sincere apology.” Such an excuse will save the face of both host and guest. enabling their relationship to continue. Clearly that is not the case regarding all these guests who had said they would attend.

Enough! The excuses offered by the 3 guests are clearly not excuses at all but deliberate and calculated insults to the host. Yesterday they had said they could attend the feast, today they are too busy with other matters. These matters are more important to them than their relationship with Master. Remember the unfolding drama is about the Messianic Banquet and the Host is The Lord! Clearly these men want to derail the Banquet all together and prevent it from proceeding. No guests mean no banquet.

The Master hears the servant’s report. The intended guests intend to humiliate him and prevent the meal going ahead. Insult and injustice cause anger. Anger generates significant energy. The Master has every right to retaliate (utu) and punish the insulting guests.

However, this Master is not just any master. He chooses a different and more costly path. He steps back from retaliation, reprocesses his anger and responds with grace. Here the Master uses the energy generated by insult and injustice and commands the servant to go into the streets and alleyways of the village to bring in the poor, the blind and the lame. Jesus here is referring to the common people, the people of the land, the people considered outcasts within Israel. These folk are welcomed into the Master’s Banquet even though they are not worthy to be seated with such a noble host. They have no possibility of repaying him with a similar banquet in return. The servant notices that even when the common people have come, yet there is still room. Notice how wide the Master’s invitation goes! So the Master gives an audacious command to his servant; for him to go beyond the village to the highways and hedges and “Compel people to enter.”

“Compel people to enter” has been mis-understood in the past. This is not about conversations and invitations at the point of a sword or a gun in their face. An outsider would have a very hard time believing that an invitation to a noble-mans’ banquet is genuine. They might think to themselves, “They don’t really want me, look at who I am and who he is. This invitation cannot be serious.” The Master is instructing the servant to impress upon these highway and hedgerow outcasts that they are indeed welcome and wanted at the Master’s Banquet. The servant is to convince them by all possible means that the invitation is serious, despite how unworthy they may feel.

After finishing the parable, Jesus addresses his host and the guests with whom he is eating. “For I tell you (the first time the plural is used in this speech) none of those men who were invited will taste my banquet.”

Did you notice whose banquet it is? “My Banquet”, says Jesus. Here is clear claim by Jesus that He is the LORD and he will be the gracious host at the Banquet at the end of the age!

The religious leaders listening to him are welcome, but if they refuse to come, the banquet will proceed with the common people of the land, the outcasts of Israel and eventually the Gentiles too. Jesus affirms Isaiah’s vision of the Messianic Banquet.

I cannot help but wonder if the guests at the meal where Jesus told this parable, ended up with a large doses of indigestion!

So, what is Jesus’ teaching in this parable?

1. Jesus is affirming that he is the unique agent of God. God’s invitation to be part of the Kingdom of God is being made through Messiah Jesus. For us or anyone else to participate in the final Banquet of Salvation promised in Isaiah 25: 6 – 9, we are invited to believe that Jesus is who he said he was (that is that Jesus is LORD) and commit to following him.
2. The Master experiences the anger because of the guests’ insulting refusal to attend. Yet this anger is transformed into grace and costly love. There are echoes of the cross here. Indeed, The Lord’s anger lasts only a moment but is favour lasts a life-time (Ps 30: 5).
3. Grace is prominent in the parable. Who deserves an invitation to God’s celebration Banquet at the end of the age? WE cannot receive an invitation by our right behavior or by the so called “good works” that we do. Jesus invitation to Peter, Andrew, James and John is the same invitation extended to us – to follow Jesus and become part of his tribe, family and team. This invitation cannot be earned, it is undeserved grace from beginning to end and is to be received with gratitude and thanksgiving. For those who have a hard time accepting God’s grace, special pleading may be needed of the Lord’s desire for them to come.
4. Jesus touches on his mission. The Master’s servants take message to the ordinary people and to outcasts, that the Banquet is now ready, come and enjoy the celebration.. It is implied that the Master’s servants participate in Jesus’ mission of carrying the good news invitation to the highways and hedgerows, that is to all people. The servants participate as messengers of this good news invitation.
5. There is judgment here too. Those who refuse the invitation cut themselves off from fellowship with the host and his other guests. The host does not retract the invitation or shut the door. Rather the guests who decline Jesus’ gracious invitation are shutting themselves off from God’s saving love and goodness. By their own choice, they will not taste the God’s celebration Banquet at the end of the age.

Finally, when we celebrate communion there is a sense in which we are foreshadowing the Messiah’s great banquet. At communion believers are invited in the present to anticipate in the Messianic banquet of the end time. We remember the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus, we celebrate Christ’s presence and forgiveness in the present, and we look forward to the marriage supper of the Lamb at the end of the age.