The Great Banquet

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Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0:00] Joy, well let me add my word of welcome. As Rob said, I'm Martin Ayres. I'm the Senior Pastor of St. Silas Church and delighted that you could be with us whether you're someone who's been coming to St. Silas many years or you joined in relatively recent times or if you're visiting today just coming to see as is our hope with our Back to Church Sunday that you are, if you're watching and you've never watched a church service before or you've not been to a church then you're in the right place and we're glad you could join us.

Before we look at this story in a bit more detail that Jesus told I'm just going to pray and ask for God's help for each of us. So let's bow our heads wherever we are and I'll lead us in a prayer. Almighty God and loving Heavenly Father we thank you for the technology that lets us gather virtually and yet we pray too that you would guard our minds and our hearts from distraction. Help us to engage wholeheartedly with what you are saying to us. Reveal truth to us we pray and help us to respond rightly to your word that we would have hope for we ask this in Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Well one of the things that people are widely recognizing that the pandemic has done to us is it's made us think about death.
[1:30] Dr. Kate Woodthorpe is a professor and she does research into how we think about death our attitude towards death and she's talked about how this was in the newspapers how coronavirus has exposed on a mass scale how reluctant we are to face the fact that we're all going to die and the reason is that we find it so paralyzingly scary to think about our own death that instead we tend to functionally live as though death is something that happens to other people but will never happen to me.

But the numbers every day the daily death toll the stay at home save lives the wash your hands in a certain way to stay safe even the tragedy of now knowing people for many of us who have died in the pandemic these things have made it much harder for us to avoid ever thinking about the reality that we're going to die.
Now what do we do with that? Well Kate Woodthorpe says now is precisely the time to face up to our mortality and recognise that no one is bulletproof.
Similarly Dr. Laura Davis at Cambridge University has appealed to us to normalise conversation about death and the newspaper columnist Jenny McCartney says this we are still in the dark about death and it's the biggest thing that happens to us why unlike our children are we not brave enough to ask it many more questions?
So I know that's a morbid start but could this be one good thing that comes out of the pandemic that we are a bit more realistic that one day we're all going to die and we need to be prepared for what happens next.
[3:21] Now Jesus is the authority figure that we need to stop the guessing games about what it will be like when we die. He taught very plainly about it he claimed that he'd come from heaven into the world and for my money he demonstrated that authority by the way he went through death and out the other side that he is the man who died and then was seen alive again after the tomb was found empty.

So he speaks about death and what happens so that we would be prepared for it and in this story it's such a simple story that he tells but it says so much to us about how we can prepare so that we can have hope beyond death.
It's also a story that helps us answer so many other questions about the Christian life. What really is a Christian essentially? And you might be someone who thinks well I've got a friend who's really into this stuff and you know maybe you think well I believe in God a bit but is it just that it's their thing and they really love church?

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Or do I need to be into it like that? What essentially is a Christian? How do I take on board Jesus' teaching? Now Jesus told this story at a dinner party and it begins with a comment from one of the guests probably trying to lighten the mood.
He says blessed is everyone who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God. And the kingdom of God is basically what we would think of as heaven in this setting.
[4:53] So he's saying everyone who will get to heaven should be pretty happy about it. Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.

But the man as he says that he is showing the kind of complacency about it that we might encounter today. We might feel we're not really sure what's going to happen after we die.
A friend of mine who knew she was going to die she died young tragically and she said she wrote about this that she thinks of the afterlife as a kind of nothingness with benefits.
And I wonder if that sums up how lots of us would think in our culture. In other words saying we're not really sure what it will be like maybe death is the end and there's nothing beyond it for us.
But if there is something it might be better than what we have now and it's certainly nothing really to worry about. We tend to feel in Scotland today we're a pretty good bunch.
[5:53] If there is a God and there is a heaven we'll be there. It's nothing to worry about. But then Jesus tells this story and when you reflect on it carefully there are four shocks in the story.

The first surprise is that heaven is like a banquet. Just have a look with me at verses 16 and 17. If you've got a Bible to hand that would be really helpful. You can also hopefully see it on your screen as well.
Luke 14 verses 16 and 17. Jesus says 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'd been invited come for everything is now ready. The surprise here for many of us in Scotland is that this is Jesus' picture of heaven.
And the reason I think that's a surprise is because it's so different to how many of us would think about heaven today. I mean when you think of the word heaven what comes into your mind?
[6:56] For lots of us it's fluffy clouds and harps and something that's just not particularly attractive. White 90s.

If someone said to me you know gave me some good news perhaps someone said to me you know it turns out we definitely going to be able to have summer holidays this year.
You can book one. I wouldn't say to them oh that would be heaven. That's going to be heaven. It's just not the language we would use about something brilliant the word heaven.
And I remember growing up attending church sometimes and finding church terribly boring and thinking what if heaven is like an interminable church service?
you know they have the final prayer you finally got to the end of the service book and before even they've started serving out the juice and biscuits the whole thing starts again and it just goes on and on like that.
[7:53] But the real story couldn't be more different. Jesus says picture a lavish banquet and the thing with the banquet is that culturally it was a picture of the place everyone wants to be.

And I used to speak about this picture and think about all the food. You know what's on the menu for you? The beef wellington the waffle berry pudding maybe you think about the cheese board or the wine or the whiskey but of course at the moment when we think about the chance to go for dinner at someone's home we'd just be so excited for the chance to spend actually spend time indoors with friends wouldn't we?
Folks what a picture Jesus gives us here for this year of all years. A picture of friendship with conversation and laughter in someone's home without distancing without fear what a joy.
The past year has really shown us hasn't it how much we really need social interaction we thrive on it even for the introverts actually Emma Scrivener in our Real Lives Online was talking about this on Wednesday she said I'm an introvert the past year has shown me how much I need to be with people we're longing aren't we for the chance to gather with groups again people have said to me when the bars open again on Great Western Road and we can have people over for dinner there's going to be the mother of all parties imagine being back where you most like to relax with friends where is that for you when things can open again when we can have people round well that's the picture when those days come we ought to think this is a foretaste of what Jesus said that heaven will be like although so much better it's not that heaven's the boring place and the strict place Kieran

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was talking on Thursday in our Real Lives Online as a Scottish guy growing up in Scotland about his misperceptions about Christianity and saying there was this perception that he grew up with that Christianity Christianity is this thing for doer people it's this serious strict thing that takes all the joy and fun out of life and then he went to Malawi and he met Christians who were full of joy and it smashed his preconceptions well does Jesus want to do that for us with this picture that actually heaven is not the boring place and it's not that hell is the place of friendship and good company no there won't be any friends in hell that will be the place of isolation of distance from people without any hope while heaven is the place of friendship and warmth and laughter where people are together and they love each other and they laugh with each other and they enjoy being with each other and as far as the Bible is concerned the highlight of heaven the highlight of the banquet is being with the host God will be there and we'll be his people Jesus is the host of the banquet and he's amazing we should want to be with him if we'd been there in just those few years of his ministry time in the ancient Middle East 2000 years ago we would have been astonished for here was a man who had the compassion and love to help and the power to put everything right at that time people could have diseases that were infectious so that they were made unclean for society and they had to spend their time in isolation and we know we've had a glimpse over the past year of how that must have felt for people and Jesus one day met a man with leprosy who would have had to have his distance from people perhaps for many many years and Jesus went to him and he reached out and he touched him and he said be clean and the man was healed of his leprosy he could go back into society restored Jesus went to the home of a prominent man Jairus a well-known man and his daughter was 12 years old and she died and she was she was dead inside the house and people outside were wailing with grief and Jesus went in and he he raised her from death as easily as you or I might wake someone from being asleep and in his story here Jesus is saying come to my banquet it will be brilliant so if a banquet isn't your scene then just think of something that is your scene his point is we should all want to be there and another thing about a banquet is the guests don't pay it's not even you know Chancellor Rishi saying eat out to help out I'll pay half no this is Jesus saying it's all on me your future I've paid for it I want you to be here with me and you'll enjoy it the price Jesus had to pay to invite you and me to his banquet was that he had to suffer and die on the cross that is because on our own with the way we've treated God and treated each other none of us can on our own merit be entitled to be on the guest list for God's great banquet it's true of all of us and Jesus came and he died on the cross so that a great exchange a swap could take place and he could pay the price for the ways we've mistreated
[13:30] God and mistreated others so that he can then say to us without cost come to my banquet he's paid for it in fact in the story he says the message the horse sends out is come for everything is now ready in other words God wants everyone in the world and all of you watching this right now to be there at his banquet so the invitation goes out and you know how it is with invitations you have to RSVP you've got two choices are you going to come or not if you accept this invitation from Jesus from God you start a relationship with God that that actually starts now enjoying his generosity in life attributing the good things in life to him and going through them with him and going through the valleys of life with him as well as Kieran said on Thursday about going through hard times in life or experiencing suffering God doesn't just offer you light at the end of the tunnel there is light with him in the tunnel so it starts now living your life

God's way looking to please him while you wait for his glorious banquet but now we come to the second surprise in Jesus story and it's some people refuse to come to the banquet so have a look with me at verse 18 they all alike began to make excuses what's going on here it's strange such a generous invitation in Jesus story to his bank to the banquet but people decline it and we have when we have a look at the excuses that Jesus tells us they're not very good if you ever look at the first one he says I've just bought a field I need to go and see it well what's that about what sort of a person buys a field they've never seen and if you've bought it now it's still going to be there after the party go and have a look at it later if you look at the second one what does he say he says I've just bought some new oxen and
I've got to try them out well again what is that about why the urgency why not try them out after the banquet and if you look at the third guy it's his relationship that's got in the way he says I've just got married so I can't come and again what's the problem there can't you just bring her along or do something on your own for a change so the point here is that none of these is actually a good excuse these people they knew about the banquet well in advance they got the save the date fridge

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magnet and they could have put it in their diaries they just don't want to go that's the point and the hard truth for us here is that here in 21st century Glasgow many people are doing the same with Jesus when it comes to God we just keep putting him off often it's not that we think of ourselves as as hating God it's just that we'll get around to thinking a bit more about him another time right now we've got too much else to be doing maybe for some of us before the pandemic it was I'm too preoccupied with my job with the studies with the qualifications with house hunting with the kids activities and clubs the shopping the time with friends and then in the pandemic it's I'm dealing with the pandemic but fundamentally we're like these men with their excuses maybe you've got intellectual questions questions about evidence you want to see more before you would commit and that's entirely reasonable but we need to ask ourselves am I actually making the time to look into it to deal with some of these struggles I've got to believe could you come to our life course a week on Tuesday and try that as a way to investigate or maybe we'd need to ask are my questions actually just excuses of course lots of us are really busy but even in a busy life we will still make the time for the things that we feel are most important for us so as far as God's concerned these aren't really very good reasons to keep him at arm's length the truth is that we don't want to be near the host accepting this invitation would involve change because it involves accepting that Jesus is in charge and we don't want to change we'd rather do our own thing so how does God the master of the banquet react in the story well that's our third shock from Jesus deliberately shocking so that we would react look at with me at verse 21 the servant came back and reported this to his master then the owner of the house became angry the third shock in the story is that Jesus excludes people from his banquet he's made a personal invitation to these people the host in the story and their rejection is a personal rejection and it is a shock isn't it if you look at the very last sentence the master says not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet what do you think Jesus means by that some people perhaps many people today in today's world people like you and me will not be at this banquet there will be a place where the banquet is not going on a place of loneliness misery and despair that's the place Jesus calls hell God is offended at the way we put off his invitation the way we treat him at arm's length I don't like to say this but we need to hear it and I think that's why Jesus the most loving man who's ever lived spoke about it because we tend to think it'll be all right I've got nothing to worry about surely the idea that we really miss out on something just doesn't fit with our experience me and God we'll we'll come to an agreement I was baptized you know I went to church now and again I gave money to charity God will let me in he won't mind that I didn't commit to him because I've done my best to lead a good life none of us are perfect and lots of us were just not used to missing out

I remember when I was at university there was an incredible end of year party a ball an end of year ball and you had to get your tickets very early so I was a bit disorganized always thought everything would be fine in the end and the ball sold out and I didn't have a ticket so instead of thinking oh I've missed out I can't go I thought it's okay I'll gate crash I'll just blag my way in and this was at Cambridge where you've got a river through the city so you have these punts they're basically I mean most of you will know what a punt is with a stick and it's basically a paddleboard an ancient version of a paddleboard and what I did was I got hold of a punt on the night of this ball and I got my mate to steer me along the river in and as we got by this by the banks where this ball was going on I just walked off into the ball brilliant so I'm inside and I thought next thing I've got to do is grab a drink so I just look like I've been here a while so I've got a glass of champagne and I was there in my dinner suit in the right clothes and just thought I'd just drift in and then after not very long actually a security guard found me and he just said can I see your ticket please and I didn't have one so he said to me I'm sorry but you're gonna have to leave and I just thought even then I'll be okay so I just said look I'm come on mate I'm in the right clothes you know it's gonna be a bit of a fuss to have to leave now I've got a drink and he said I'm sorry you don't have a ticket you have to go and I was thrown out and that was that and it was an important lesson for me

[22:17] I was so used to blagging my way into everything but I couldn't do it there and sometimes we think that's how the afterlife is gonna work that we can just blag our way in even though we've not prepared for it in this life yet how embarrassing if we were to turn up on God's doorstep after we die expecting that at that point we can strike a deal and then finding out that we can't thinking that it's okay because we've been good enough when Jesus taught very clearly that we haven't going in thinking God will let me in I'll just explain to him what my thinking was and he'll understand that's how life works only to find that's not how this works and it's too late for Jesus teaching on this was so clear not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet but don't feel sorry for

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Jesus and think his party will be ruined if we're not there because there's a false shock in our story it's that the banquet is full of surprising guests just have a look with me at verses 21 to 23 the servant came back and reported this to his master that's the refusals that the excuses 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 make them come in so that my house will be full so there are a few different categories of people here the poor the crippled the blind the lame and the point in that context was these are the unlikely people the people that the religious society then would not have thought would be on the inside of God's banquet for those original hearers these are the people that didn't have a chance and Jesus is saying to the people who thought that they would get in no problem the religious moralistic good people the invitations have gone out to them instead of you and they will come in while you make your excuses and perhaps this morning that is great news for you watching wherever you are it gives each of us a fresh opportunity today in the previous chapter

Jesus described it as people will come from west and east and north and south from all over the place into the banquet and you might be someone who's been hearing about this banquet hearing about the invitations going out and thinking it sounds fantastic but it's not for me perhaps you're thinking it's not for me I'm not really a religious person Jesus says that doesn't matter just come along just speak to me and accept the invitation tell me you'd like to come you might think well I hear that and I I do have Christian friends or a family member is a Christian but I've done some really bad stuff you don't know what I've done I've lived a pretty edgy life Jesus says it doesn't matter I'm inviting you just accept the invitation perhaps you're thinking but not me I couldn't I'm a Muslim I'm an atheist I'm an what's the word an agnostic Jesus says just accept my invitation today and you can come to my party if only we'll accept him today he'll accept us to his great banquet it will be full of unlikely guests think about our own church family here at St Silas how we have an Iranian guy who fled from Iran as he became a Christian and faced death threats years ago that would have been unthinkable think about Friday night when we interviewed Billy McCurry at Real Lives Online a guy who heard about Jesus offer in prison for being a terrorist and was overwhelmed to realize this invitation is valid for me because it's valid for everyone and so for many people today we've got other priorities and we'll keep putting off the invitation until it's too late but meanwhile while that might be going on in Glasgow and Scotland and Western Europe other people are streaming in in Africa in Latin America in China they are full of joy why because they have set their hope on this they cannot believe that they could be invited by a man as good as
Jesus to a party as good as this one and we might look at them today in global terms as the have-nots and maybe we think patronizingly about that and think oh well they need something to hope in but one day if we don't accept this invitation personally the rules will be reversed and they will have this wonderful future they'll be on the inside of the great banquet and many of us may be left on the outside the point is the banquet will be full and it will be glorious it will be thrilling it will be full of joy whether or not you or I are there and Jesus wants you there he died so that he could invite you there and I want to urge you with everything I've got to accept the invitation to his banquet remember the picture he gives us of what heaven will be like it will be wonderful inside please let nothing else in your life get in the way let's pray together I've got a prayer here it's a prayer that any of us could pray if we've already accepted the invitation for some time but it's I've worded a prayer in a way that you could say this prayer if you've never actually accepted the invitation and you think today I'd like to do that and the way you do that is you say to God sorry thank you and please sorry for the ways I've lived and treated you before thank you that Jesus has died for me and invited me to the banquet and accept that gift asking please help me from now on to live with you in charge of my life to please you because I'm looking forward to being with you forever so let me say that prayer heavenly father I'm sorry that by the way I've treated you and the way I've treated other people
I don't deserve a place in heaven thank you that Jesus came and died on the cross for me so that I could be invited to your heavenly banquet I now accept that gift that invitation please come into my life by your spirit and help me from now on to live my life knowing you and pleasing you while I wait for heaven with you where you have secured my place in Jesus name amen well it's because of this these great promises and this great work of Jesus that Christians are devoted to him and we're going to sing in response to what we've heard it's an old hymn crown him with many crowns where

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we speak of how Jesus deserves honor and glory for his great work so let's sing together

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