

The Great Banquet

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Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 00] We're reading this morning from Luke's account of Jesus' life, the book of Luke, chapter 14, which you can find on page 1048 in the Bibles.

Luke chapter 14, beginning at verse 15, the parable of the great banquet. When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.

Jesus replied, 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 had been invited, Come, for everything is now ready.

But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, I've just bought a field. I must go and see it. Please excuse me. Another said, I've just bought five yoke of oxen. I'm on my way out to try them out. Please excuse me.

Still another said, I've just got married, so I can't come. The servant came back and reported this to his master. 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.

[1 : 16] 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 compel them to come in so that my house will be full.

I tell you, not one of those who are invited will get a taste of my banquet. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks, Katrina, for reading.

And if you can keep your Bibles open at that little story Jesus told, Luke chapter 14, on page 1048, that would be very helpful so that you can follow along as we look at that together.

And I'm just going to leave us in a prayer so that we ask God to make himself known to each one of us. Let's just bow our heads and I'll say a prayer. Almighty God and loving Heavenly Father, in a world of different truth claims and different demands for our attention, we thank you for this opportunity to think about who you are and how we relate to you.

And so I pray that this morning, wherever each of us stands with you, that you will make yourself known to us so that we can understand the meaning for our lives now and for our lives after we die.

[2 : 37] We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, a little while ago there was a neurosurgeon, Dr. Alexander, who he got into the news because he changed his view about what happens after you die because he had a near-death experience.

I don't know what you make of those things. We hear about them from time to time. But whatever you think about near-death experiences, the fact this neurosurgeon publicly said that he'd had one meant people started thinking a bit more about what really does happen after we die.

And there was a newspaper columnist, Jenny McCartney, who wrote, Let's not be shy about the afterlife. And she said this, I've noticed that the first time small children get a whiff of the concept of death, they can't stop talking about it.

And their questions are notably to the point, Is it going to hurt? Where do we go? Can you come back? Then she says, I can't say I blame them, really. Revelations don't come much bigger than the ones saying that on some as yet unknown day, each of us is going to depart from this world and no one will see us again in this life.

And yet, in contrast to the pleasingly direct approach of children towards the matter, most adults spend their time ignoring it and hushing it up.

[3 : 58] And then she finished her article with the challenge, We're 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?

And she's right, isn't she? One day we're all going to die, and we need to think about what will happen next. Some people say that nothing will happen, that there will just be nothingness.

Other people have all kinds of ideas, but how can we know with confidence? We can't work that out on our own. We need an expert to help us, and Jesus is that expert.

He is the man who came from heaven, from beyond our world, into our world, with the authority to tell us what will happen after we die. And in this one simple story Jesus told, he addresses so many questions we might have today about God.

What's it really like to be a Christian? Does it really matter whether or not I'm a Christian, or what I make of Jesus? I mean, you might have come with a friend, and you think, well, my friend, they come regularly here.

[5 : 02] They're really into this stuff. But is that just because it's their thing, their hobby? Am I okay without getting too into this stuff? What about the rest of us? And Jesus told this story at a dinner party, and the comment from one of the guests at the beginning was probably meant to try and lighten the mood.

Jesus has been very challenging, and if you look at what the man says, he says, blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God. Now, the kingdom of God is the place where God is known as king.

So it's what we might think of today as heaven. And this man is saying, the people who go there, including us guys at the meal, I guess, they're going to be pretty happy to get to heaven.

But what the man says here shows complacency, that he thinks, we haven't really got anything to worry about when it comes to whether we'll get to heaven.

And I think we encounter that kind of complacency today, don't we? We might feel we're not really sure what will quite happen after we die, but if we're going to be clear on anything, it would be, we've got nothing to fear.

[6 : 12] We're not too worried about it. And I had a friend who died a couple of years ago. She died young, and she wrote a book as she prepared for death, and she described what she was thinking would happen after she died, and she called it nothingness with benefits.

So she's kind of saying, I'm not really sure what it will be like, but I just don't really have anything to be afraid of. We're complacent about it. Have we really got nothing to be worried about?

Well, then Jesus tells this story, and when you reflect carefully on it, there are four shocks in the story. And the first shock is that heaven is like a banquet.

Have a look with me at verses 16 and 17. Jesus replied, 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.

This is Jesus' picture of heaven, and the reason I think it's a surprise is that it's so different to how many of us think about heaven today. I mean, when you think of the word heaven, what comes into your mind?

[7 : 24] Clouds? Harps? White nighties? Philadelphia cheese, if you're old enough for that? And so we don't really fancy it. If someone said to me, you know, do you want to go out for a beer tonight, one of my friends, I would never say to them, oh, that would be heaven.

Because it just would sound odd in our culture. We don't think of heaven as a brilliant time. And I remember growing up occasionally attending church services that I found very boring and thinking, what if heaven is going to be like an interminable church service?

You know, you kind of finally get to the end, and instead of the juice and the biscuits bit that I used to enjoy, the whole thing starts again, and it just goes on forever. But the real story couldn't be more different.

Jesus says, picture a lavish banquet. And the thing with the banquet is, culturally, it was a picture of the place that everyone would want to be.

I don't know if you have seen or remember the Harry Potter films when the children kind of arrive in the school and they're sitting down long tables in the dining hall, and then suddenly, bang, the food appears, and the fun starts, and this great evening begins at the start of the year.

[8 : 43] If heaven is going to be a banquet, I wonder what would be on the menu for you. Maybe you think of beef wellington or roasted venison. Maybe you're thinking about the wine or about the dessert menu, about the waffle berry pudding, the Bailey's cheesecake, the cheese board, the whiskey.

Maybe you're a vegan and none of that appeals to you. Well, think of something that does appeal. That's the picture. And of course, banquets aren't just about the food. It's about the people, the friendships, the conversation, the laughter.

I don't know where you most like to relax with friends, maybe out for dinner, where you can talk and talk. And sometimes, you look at your watch, don't you, and you think, oh, is it that late? Where did the time go?

Because you're having so much fun with people that you love being with. Well, that's the picture. That's what heaven will be like. It's not that heaven is the boring place. It's not that hell's the place of friendship and good company.

There won't be any friends in hell. Hell is the place of loneliness. Heaven is where there's friendship and warmth and laughter, where people love each other and they laugh together and they enjoy being together.

[9 : 55] And as far as the Bible is concerned, the highlight of heaven is being with the host. God is there and we'll be his people.

Jesus is the host of this banquet and he's amazing and we should want to be with him. If we'd been there in the few years that he was at work in the Middle East, we'd have been astonished because here was a man who had the power and compassion to put things right when he saw things that were wrong.

Our newspapers and magazines, they're full of stories about how to halt the aging process, about health advice, beauty advice, gym routines, makeovers, get a six pack in four weeks, all that kind of thing.

But Jesus went to the house of a prominent man, Jairus, whose daughter, who was 12 years old, had died and he raised her from the dead as easily as you or I might wake a little girl from being asleep.

He went to a wedding and he turned the water into vintage wine. He was the man that you want to be with. And in his story here, he's saying, heaven is going to be brilliant.

[11 : 06] It's like a banquet with me. So if a banquet isn't your scene, just think of something that is your scene. His point is that we should all want to be there. And another thing about a banquet is that the guests don't pay.

If you get invited to a banquet, it's all on the host. And Jesus here is like a rich friend who can invite you on a luxury holiday and say, it's all on me.

I want you to come. I want you to be there. I want you to enjoy it. You don't have to pay for it. Just be with me. I used to work as a lawyer and in my firm, our clients were basically these blue chip companies that pay a fortune for lawyers.

But in order to kind of solve everyone's conscience, you could do a bit of free legal advice for people who need it on the side. And they call that pro bono work. So we had a pro bono officer in the law firm.

And where there were opportunities to provide legal advice for free, she would email around the department saying, does anyone have time to take on this client, do this pro bono work? And she'd sign off the emails saying, if you can do this, you will get to heaven.

[12 : 12] That's what she'd say. Now, of course, she was being lighthearted and a bit desperate to get people to help. But the truth is that there is something in there of this idea that if I can do some good stuff, then I'll get to heaven.

And the truth is that if it were down to us to earn our own way to this great banquet, none of us can get there on our own. We've not been good enough to be there.

But the thing about a banquet is the host pays. And Jesus has paid the price so that he can invite all of us to his banquet. He paid the price when he died on the cross in our place, bearing our punishment so that the banquet is on him.

You saw the message the host sends out. He says in verse 17, come for everything is now ready. In other words, God wants everyone in the world and everyone here in this room to be there at his banquet.

So the invitation goes out and you know how it is with invitations where there's an RSVP. You've got two choices, haven't you? These days in our house, none of them are for me. They're all for the kids. But you get these party invitations and you have to RSVP.

[13 : 23] Are they going to be there or not? If you accept this invitation from God, you start a relationship with him that starts now, enjoying his generosity, enjoying knowing him, but with the challenge of living your life his way.

We heard a bit about that from Rowley, didn't we? And you do that while you wait for his glorious banquet. So that's our first surprise from the story Jesus told.

Heaven is going to be like a banquet. But after Jesus sets this wonderful scene, his next words are like he drops a bombshell in the room.

Our second shock is that some people refuse to come to the banquet. If you have a look with me at verse 18. But they all alike began to make excuses.

What's going on here? It's such a generous invitation but people don't want to come. And if you have a look at the excuses, they're not very good.

[14 : 25] If you have a look at the first one, he says, I've just bought a field and I need to go and see it. 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, isn't it, after the banquet? Look at the second one. I've just bought five yoke of oxen and I'm on my way to try them out.

Please excuse me. Well, again, why the urgency? You've known about the banquet for ages now. The invitation went out. Why do you have to go and see the oxen now?

And then the third one. I've just got married. So I can't come. Well, what's the problem? Can't you bring her along?

Or, why don't you do something on your own for a change? So the point here is that none of these are actually very good excuses. These people, they knew about the banquet. They got their save the date fridge magnet ages ago, months ago, so they didn't miss it.

[15 : 28] They could have put it in their diaries and kept it free. And the reason they make excuses is the bottom line is they don't want to go. And the hard truth for us here in 21st century Glasgow is that many of us are doing the same today with Jesus.

When it comes to God, we keep putting him off. Often, it's not that we think of ourselves as hating God. You know, I haven't got a lot against God. I don't dislike God.

It's just that we'll get around to thinking a bit more about him when we've got time, another time. Right now, we've got too much else to be doing. We're preoccupied with the job, the studies, the research, the qualifications, the house hunting, the kids' activities, the kids' clubs, the shopping, the time with friends.

We're like these men with their excuses. You might be someone who's got intellectual questions about evidence. You want to look further into it.

Well, I think that's entirely reasonable. That's a good thing. But we need to ask ourselves, when am I actually making the time to look into those questions I've got?

[16 : 39] Could you come tonight to Life Explode to make that time? Or are your questions just excuses to put things off? You might be really busy.

But of course we're busy. We've made choices in our lives that make us really busy. But if we're being honest, could we admit that however busy we are, we do still make the time to fit in the things that are most important to us.

So as far as God is concerned, these are not really good reasons to hold him at arm's length. The truth is, we don't want to be with the host.

Accepting his invitation would involve change, life change, because it involves accepting that Jesus is in charge, that he has the right to tell us how to live and we don't want to change.

We'd rather do our own thing in life. So how does God, the master of the banquet, react in the story? Well that's our third shock from Jesus. If you have a look with me at verse 21.

[17 : 45] 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 the banquet.

He's made a personal invitation to people and their rejection is a personal rejection. And it is a shock, isn't it? If you look at the very end of the story, verse 24, the master says, I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.

Jesus excludes people from the banquet. What else could he mean by that? Some people, perhaps many people, people like you and me, are not going to be at the banquet.

There will be a place where the banquet is not going on. A place of loneliness, misery, despair. The place that Jesus calls hell. God is offended, he's affronted at the way we treat him and his invitation.

The way we push him out and treat him at arm's length. And I don't like to say that, but we need to hear it. Because we tend to think, it'll be alright. It's going to be okay.

[19 : 05] The idea that we'd really miss out on something doesn't fit in with our experience. Me and God will come to an agreement. I was baptized. I went to church now and again.

I gave some money to charity. God will sort me out. And lots of us were just not used to missing out. I remember at my university, there was an incredible, there were these incredible end-of-year parties, end-of-year balls.

And some of them were hard to get tickets for, the best ones. But I was a pretty complacent person, wasn't used to missing out. So the tickets go on sale. I never got around to getting a ticket.

I thought, it'll be fine. The next thing I hear, it's sold out. I've missed it. I can't get a ticket. Asked around friends, couldn't get a ticket for this party. And the party was on a river.

Like it was sort of in a, you know, it's a posh university, right? So it's like an old college. There's a river running through it. So I came up with a plan to blag my way into this party. I got my friend, we got a boat, and he rode me and a friend into the party.

[20 : 11] Dinner suit on, sat in the boat, going through in the dark on the river, and as he got near, we just walked up out of the boat into the bank, into the party. Next thing I thought I need to do, get a drink in my hand.

Then I'll just look like I've been there all evening. Found a drink, glass of champagne, I'm in. Dinner suit on, fine. And then a little while later, a guy on security came up to me and he said, can I see your ticket?

And I didn't have a ticket. But even then, I thought, it's going to be fine. I said, oh, I haven't got a ticket with me. He said, if you can't show me your ticket, you need to leave. I said, oh, well, you know, it's going to be a bit of fuss now, isn't it?

I'm here now, I've got my drink, I'm dressed right, can't I just stay in? I'm sorry, if you haven't got a ticket, you need to leave. I'm taking you out now. Oh, come on, you know, be generous, no, you've got to go.

And that was it. And I was sent out, sent packing, had to leave. I was on the outside, the party went on without me. But it was a great lesson for me to learn. I was so used to blagging my way into everything.

[21 : 16] But I couldn't do it there. And sometimes, we think that's how the afterlife is going to work. That however we've treated God in this life, we'll just be able to blag our way in.

Surely, I mean, if he doesn't let me in, it's not going to be very much fun. Yet, how embarrassing to turn up on God's doorstep after we die, expecting that we can strike a deal, and then finding out that you can't do that, that it's too late.

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. And then we find out, it's not how life works. And it's too late.

Because Jesus warned us, that's not how it's going to work. He said that God will say, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.

It's shocking. But don't feel sorry for Jesus and think that God's party is going to be ruined because there is a fourth shock in the story, and it's that the banquet is full of surprising guests.

[22 : 22] If you have a look with me from verse 21, the servant reports to the master. The master gets angry, but then he orders the servant. He says, 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 more room. Then the master told his servant, go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in so that my house will be full.

Now there are a few categories here. What we have to understand culturally is that the people Jesus mentions here create shock in the room. For these are the people who were not expected to be on side with God, to be heading to the kingdom of God.

People would have thought they don't have a chance of getting into heaven. And Jesus says to the religious people in the room, the invitations are going out to them, the outsiders, because of the way you are treating God.

And perhaps this morning that is great news for some of us here. Because you might have been hearing about the banquet hearing about the invitations. You might have come today thinking it does sound brilliant but it's not for me.

[23 : 40] Maybe you're thinking well I'm not really a religious person. Jesus says it doesn't matter. Just come along. Well I hear that and I do have Christian friends but I've done some really bad stuff.

I've lived a pretty edgy life. I'm a man of the world. Jesus says it doesn't matter. I'm inviting you. I'm inviting everyone. Just accept the invitation. And you can come.

Oh you're thinking but not for me. I'm I couldn't. I'm a Muslim. I'm an atheist. I'm I'm what they called an agnostic person. Jesus says if you want to come just accept the invitation and you'll be there.

Your name will be down. We'll welcome you in. Just accept his invitation today and you can go to his party. It's really as simple as that. It's his banquet.

It lasts forever. It's going to be wonderful forever. And if you accept him he'll accept you. And yet for many people today we just have other priorities and we'll keep putting it off until the invitation keep putting off the invitation until it's too late.

[24 : 49] And meanwhile what we're seeing globally is that others are streaming in. In Latin America in Africa in China they are over the moon. They cannot believe that they could be invited by a man as good as Jesus to a banquet as good as this.

And we look at them today in global terms as the have-nots and we think oh well maybe they just need something to hope in over there. But one day if we don't act on this invitation the roles will be reversed and they'll be on the inside of this great banquet and many from Scotland today will be left on the outside.

The banquet is going to be epic it will be full full of incredibly diverse people whether or not you and I are there. And so I want to urge you with everything I've got to accept God's invitation to his great banquet.

Remember that picture of what heaven will be like. It's going to be wonderful inside. Please let nothing else in your life get in the way. You might be somebody here today who thinks this is outrageous I've never heard anything like this.

Well thank you for coming. Please will you come back to keep thinking. You might be someone who thinks now is the time for me really to step in and get my questions answered.

[26 : 11] Life explored tonight. It would be great to have you there. But maybe for some you think today is the day to accept the invitation for the first time. I'm going to finish with a prayer that enables you to do that.

As we say to God sorry for the way we've treated him. Thank you for this invitation. Please let me accept that and come into my life now that I might live for you.

So let me say that prayer for us. 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 this heavenly banquet. I now accept 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 this heavenly banquet with you where you have secured my place.

[27 : 22] In Jesus name Amen.