

Sunday 15th August 2021
Luke 14:15-24
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Brightons Parish Church

Let us take a moment to pray before we think about God's word:

Holy Spirit, come among us and soften our hearts to the word of God.

Holy Spirit, come among us and help us to follow after Jesus.

Holy Spirit, come among us with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus name. Amen

Have you ever been at a meal with friends or family maybe and at some point someone slips in a wee comment that changes the whole atmosphere? Have you ever been there? Maybe it's a comment about politics like independence or how good a bad our job our Nicola is doing. Maybe it's in relation to a thorny family issue or a very delicate personal matter. Well, in Jesus day it doesn't seem like they had the old adage that we have of never talking about politics, sex, or religion at the dinner table, and I guess if you're meeting with a bunch of religious leaders you're going to talk about religion it surely is going to be on the agenda, and so our story today finds Jesus at the table with a Pharisee, a prominent Pharisee and he's surrounded by other guests probably other Pharisees maybe other appropriate people, no riff-raff at this special occasion, and already if you flick back in your Bible and look at the earlier part of chapter 14 Jesus has already done some quite startling and said some quite startling things and you could literally cut the tension in the air, it's that palpable, and, I guess, that's what prompts one person at the dinner table to say a wee comment that just jars a little bit. He says 'Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.' We might paraphrase this guest is saying 'Brothers, brothers, despite our differences wouldn't it be nice for us all to experience that great feast when the kingdom of God finally comes.' Oh, awkward comment, because it seems Jesus is ready to kind of pounce on that, He's ready to point out a number of false assumptions there, and so, he tells another parable

and in this particular parable Jesus is speaking of a certain man who is holding a great feast and he invites guests to be there. Now, in the culture of that day, when you invited guests to dinner you told them the day but you did not tell them the exact time, and this was because the host needed to find out how many guests were going to be there and then he or she would make sure there was enough food prepared. There's no just walking down to Tesco for your burgers or venison or whatever it happens to be that you're ordering that day, and so, just before the feast is ready, the host sends his or her servant to each of the guests to say 'That's the meal's ready, we've had the proper time so now's the time to come to the banquet room.' So, in other words, the people who were first invited and go to and they've actually said 'I'm coming.' they've already said they're going to be there, the host is expecting them to turn up, and yet we find each guest making an excuse and that in itself and that culture would have been highly rude, and it's made worse by their very poor excuses.

Now, Jesus doesn't go into every excuse that every guest gives, He simply provides a sample of the kind of excuses.

And so, the first one says 'I have just bought a field. I must go and see it. Please excuse me.' Now, in our culture buying a house takes ages doesn't it, really annoying, it took a

long time in those days as well, and so this man would have had many opportunities to go and examine the land it was about to buy, and what's more feast happened in the evening and the call to come would have been in the evening as well, and so he doesn't really have much time to go and visit this field before it gets dark. It's a ridiculous excuse,

and the second excuse is very similar 'I've just bought five yoke of oxen and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.' now he's very polite but you wouldn't buy something before you tried it out especially oxen that you want to make sure have got the strength to pull through that field. Clearly this guest just does not want to be there.

Now, the third excuse sounds a little more sincere, a little more important, we might say. 'U've just got married so I can't come.' but he's not very polite isn't he, and how often how many weddings do you know that happened just a little within days, none, they take weeks and months to organize and it was even worse back in those days because marriage feasts could take up to seven days, a seven-day party. This guest has known about the banquet invitation for a long time and yet they've chosen to disregard it, they've chosen to snub the host and take for granted this feast that they've been invited to. So, his excuse is pretty poor as well,

and friends, there's much that we could take away from this parable today, but one of the first take home lessons and questions for us is whether we are making excuses towards God's invitation. Again, and again Jesus issues us with an invitation to follow Him, to come to Him for forgiveness and new life, and by coming to Him and finding in Him what our souls desire, and need to lay down our lives for Him and, just in case you think I'm making this up, here's some invitations from Jesus:

He says 'The kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news, come follow me' that's issued to every one of us without excuse. He goes on to say 'I am the bread of life, whoever comes to me will never go hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty' there is a hunger and thirst in your soul that you will not find met by any other source. Have you come to Jesus? Have you allowed him to meet that deepest hunger and yearning of your soul and, key to all is, to know His forgiveness.? Jesus says 'My blood is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'. Could you say that you know your sins are forgiven, that you stand right with God? Can you say that, can you say it confidently? And then finally, Jesus says that if you've come to Him, if you know life through Him then actually, it will cost you. He says 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. Whoever wants to save their life will lose it but whoever loses their life for me will save it.'

Friends, Jesus issues us all with an invitation and it's not just an invitation that you can tick the box and just leave it aside until the time is convenient. Each day, every morning that you wake up is a new day to choose to follow Jesus, to choose to respond to Jesus. So, have you responded, have you responded and this is for every age from the youngest to the oldest, have you responded? and maybe you think 'Well Scott, I'm in church, I'm in church, I'm watching at home, maybe that's enough, that surely shows

I've responded.' Well Jesus says this elsewhere 'Not everyone who says to me lord, lord will enter the kingdom of heaven. Many will come to me and on that day, the judgment day, and say lord, lord did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons in your name, perform many miracles? Then I will tell them plainly 'I never knew you.'

Friends, it's possible to be very busy in church, it's possible to be very regular in church and religious things, and to be religious on the outside and yet never properly respond to Jesus, and, just like with that uncomfortable guest who makes that awkward comment, it's not enough to just say something nice, religious sounding, to have some nice pious sentiments, Jesus is not after that. He is after a people who know Him, who follow Him, and so they are known to Him too. Does that describe you, friends? Does that describe you? Are we people who make excuses? Do we make excuses? Do we keep Jesus at arm's length?

In the parable each of the three excuses is a prioritization of something else above Jesus and the first two it's simple materialism and we're like 'Well, I'm not like that. I'm not that bad.' The third one is a bit quirky because it's a marriage, it's really important, God is really for marriage and yet, as we heard last week, to prioritize anything above Jesus, to delay responding to Jesus in preference for something else, well, that is the sin of idolatry, it's making God second, and it's turning something good into something bad. Are we people, are we a congregation, are we individuals who make excuses towards Jesus or do we respond to Him? Do we know Jesus and does He know us?

Because, if we're pushing Jesus aside, if we're prioritizing other things above Jesus, and snubbing His invitation then the parable does carry a warning 'I tell you not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.' The invitation isn't open-ended, it's not open-ended, there is a time to respond.

Are you responding to Jesus and that might look like something different from your life, to my life, or to the person you're sitting next to.

Maybe you've never responded to Jesus and said 'Jesus I want you as my lord and savior' and maybe today is the day for that. Or maybe Jesus is calling you to a deeper level of faith, maybe he's calling you to make a particular choice, maybe he's calling you to volunteer and serve in a particular way, something way outside your comfort zone or to make Him the priority of your life above everything else, and maybe today is a day to do that and so before we go on to one final point in our sermon today I want to take a moment to pause and to give us an opportunity to respond now, before we leave those doors and forget what God has said in this moment. So, let us take a moment to pray. Let us pray.

So, what is God putting upon your heart? Where are you needing to respond? What's His invitation to you today, or in recent days and weeks?

And if you're needing to come to Jesus for the first time or you want to recommit yourself to Jesus and ask him to be your lord and savior then in the quiet of your heart pray this prayer with me

Lord Jesus I'm sorry for the things I've done wrong

please forgive me as i name them in the stillness as i name my sins

I turn lord from everything that i know is wrong

I thank you, you died on the cross for me so that i could be forgiven and brought home that I could be a daughter or son of the living God

come into my life by your spirit fill me now that i might choose you each and every day

thank you, Lord Jesus

And if Jesus is already your Lord where do you need to follow Him? Where is he calling you to step out or prioritize Him? Do you need to share your faith with someone? Do you need to volunteer in a certain way? Do you need to turn from a particular area of sin?

Let me pray for you.

Lord, whether to acquire it ever it may be you're saying to us individually and collectively we ask for your grace your grace that gives power to equip us to help us walk your way to following your footsteps to grow in holiness to give ourselves over to you in increasing measure pour out your grace fell as a fresh lord that we may have your power and love and conviction and all that we need that we might glorify you in our day and in our lives for we ask it in Jesus name amen

so one final point before we we finish up for this morning and Jesus he was speaking originally to the pharisees and through the pharisees not only challenging them but challenging the wider nation because despite all the demonstrations of power that we've seen time and time again over the summer as we've looked at different passages these leaders and these the wider nation are not responding to Jesus in the way they should they fail to see what God was doing in their day and it's tragic really because this is the moment they have been waiting for 400 years since the last prophet and here comes Jesus and they don't see him for who he is here is the man the pharisees are purifying themselves for they were doing so because they yearned for God's kingdom to come they were sacrificing so much to usher in the arrival of the messiah all the quicker and yet they don't see what is right in front of them they don't see it in the parable those first guests that the host goes back to they are actually the Jewish nation, the original invitees in the parable and incar they caught they're contrasted with who comes later in the parable we talk about the poor and the such like the blind the lame the crippled and so in contrast to the poor there is the rich the original invitees and Jesus is portraying

him in monetary terms but he's actually speaking in spiritual terms because as Paul later reminds us he says this about Israel my people the people of Israel theirs is the adoption to sonship theirs the divine glory the covenants the receiving of the law the temple worship and the promises theirs of the patriarchs and from them is traced the human ancestry of the messiah who is God over all this is the Israelites spiritual heritage they're spiritually rich they're spiritually blessed and yet they don't respond to the invitation of Jesus they don't see in Jesus their messiah

and what does God do in the parable he goes to others he goes around those original invitees he goes around his people and invites the nations invites those who were less spiritually rich they did not have this heritage though some thankfully in Israel did turn to Jesus and part of the issue that holds them back is they expect God to behave in a certain way they had certain expectations because God had made rules and they interpreted those rules in a certain way and that as such the messiah had to behave in a certain way and Jesus doesn't conform with their expectations if you go back in earlier and look Jesus heals on the sabbath and that was sinful in their eyes the messiah wouldn't heal on the sabbath the messiah obeys the laws of God but it was the laws of God as interpreted by them and so they missed out on who was in front of them and what God was doing in their day and it makes me wonder brothers and sisters do i do we make ourselves blind to the activity of God do we only see God's hand at work and as long as it happens within our expectations as long as God conforms to our self-determined limits

do we only honor God if we follow our rules in the box we've put God in I've been talking about that box for two and a half years

so for example this touches on all areas of church life and how the minister should dress if i was to rock up in a pair of white trainers one day would that cause a stir does that is that honoring to God or not in your frame of reference might do that one day just to see if it pushes your buttons and or in worship what we do here on a Sunday morning what is and isn't honoring to God in your view how much of that actually conforms to the scriptures and how elders should perform their duties

in what we prioritize and spend our money on in the duties the minister should perform and then the number of pastoral visits he should do in x, y, z either this could go on

what happens if someone was to come up to me during worship and say i feel God's given me a prophetic word to share and my preference would be i would share that if they told me and what happens if i said if someone feels there may be God saying this and i was to share that word could we handle that or would or can we only worship God within the boundaries we have set because of our experience or dare i say our tradition and speaking of traditions is it possible that the Church of Scotland is really the worst at this in some ways now I've grown up through the Church of Scotland and I'm committed to the Church of Scotland in many ways so I'm not just targeting us but we are quite bad at this we've got our way our presbyterian way we've exported it across the world and maybe it blinds us to what God might want to do in our day because we've got this rich

spiritual heritage and it is a rich spiritual heritage is it in many ways a good spiritual heritage but does it blind us to what God might do does it inhibit does it undermine us even because i was listening to a podcast just this past week and the individual being interviewed said this sometimes a tradition will not pass on the flame it will hand you the ashes sometimes a tradition will not pass on the flame it will hand you the ashes

and it it wasn't in reference to the church of scotland so this could be anywhere anyway any organization but we're thinking about ourselves just now because i've said it before and i'll keep saying it we're a declining denomination we're a declining church congregation despite recent members joining us and yet because of our inherited size it's great the brightest is so big and because of our successes we've got youth organizations and we've got sunday school and we're looking to have a youth worker because of these successes it can blind us to the reality that unless things change unless we discern what Jesus is doing and where he is leading us in our day then in a very short period of time we might have to make some very difficult choices just look at the volunteer needs that we emailed out this week nearly every section of sunday school needs help more than half of our sections across girls brigade and boys brigade need help pre-fives needs help i've just named every area of ministry that we do with children and young people and if we don't invest in that we don't have a church

now we could do something about that we could step out our comfort zone we could volunteer no matter our age or stage

but there's a question in my mind is does something on our tradition hold us back our way of doing church because as i say we are declining nationally and still locally and we see churches in the braze facing the prospect of having to close

is it possible that our tradition is not passing on the flame of faith of passionate workers worshipers of Jesus who live in their community and speak of their faith in such ways that it captivates their neighbors and they want to follow Jesus or are we simply just passing on some ashes to the next generation

and that's hard to hear

but you know church i believe i really do believe God is on the move i believe he wants to be on the move i believe he's doing things in the last two and a half years we've changes have begun but they've been uncomfortable changes at times we've moved from from um elders districts to pass-through groupings and you might think that that's just a name change but actually there's much more that it could lead to and we tried to experiment a bit with that over the summer but you know what for whatever reason only a fraction of our congregation said they were up for that and there might be very good reasons we might not want to give our contact details to people we don't know i understand that

but these are our church family

and yet we weren't up for it and how many things in the last two and a half years could you say you've implemented from a sermon because i don't just come up with hopefully some nonsense i try to pass on some things i think will help you that will equip us so like after last week's sermon did you go and buy a book did you do anything with that sermon because that's a really simple thing i'm not asking you to go and evangelize your neighbor buy a book read a story get inspired or four weeks ago just before my summer break i gave you two ideas for prayer one who are the two people you're praying for to come to faith locally have you got your two people have you done anything with that because see if we don't pray for people we'll never care enough for people to invite them to church or the other prayer idea was um are you praying before you come to church because you're coming with expectation did you pray this morning even if you're at home by the way did you pray

or do you just take it as oh there goes scott again young annoying minister who keeps challenges and i'm getting really tired of the challenge does it go in one near and out the other do we forget it by the time we get to the church door because i think God tries to inspire me to talk on a sunday i'm hopefully not just waffling some war hot air so are we doing anything about it are we just ticking the box of the invitation

God's i believe God friends i believe God is inviting us into something more to have faith we could never imagine and he's trying to get our attention he's trying to get us to change to take us deeper in faith and to fuller walk with him not only for our benefit yes he wants to to quench the thirst of your soul as Jesus said but through you through us he has got much in store for our parish and for the braze area and he wants them to come into the kingdom and know his loving grace he's inviting us to partner with him and if we will not listen if we will not respond to that invitation he might do what he did in the parable and what he did in the life of Jesus in the church he might go round us he might go around us because his invitation must go out the kingdom seats must be filled

and so the choice is ours will we respond will we respond to what God is doing in our day and in our midst

i pray it may be so amen