

Scripture Reading For Sunday September 8th 2019

Isaiah 25:6-9 (NIV)

On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. ⁷ On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; ⁸ he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people’s disgrace from all the earth. The LORD has spoken. ⁹ In that day they will say, “Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.”

Luke 14:1,7-24 (NIV)

¹⁴ One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched.

⁷ When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: ⁸ “When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. ⁹ If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give this person your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up to a better place.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. ¹¹ For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” ¹² Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

¹⁵ 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.” ¹⁶ Jesus replied: “A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. ¹⁷ At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’ ¹⁸ “But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, ‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.’ ¹⁹ “Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’ ²⁰ “Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’ ²¹ “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.’ ²² “‘Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’ ²³ “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. ²⁴ I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.’”

Sermon: The Upside-Down Kingdom of God

It has been noted that in Luke's gospel, Jesus is either *going to* a meal, or *at* a meal, or *coming from* a meal!¹ This focus on food is surely evidence that Jesus was a Presbyterian! In today's reading we are told that this lunch on the Sabbath, in a house of a prominent Pharisee, and that he is being "carefully watched."² We *readers* are therefore alerted to the fact that what Jesus says and does is really a test; he is being scrutinised by this religious leader and his guests.³ However, Jesus is also astute and studies *them*, and he notices how the guests picked the places of honour at the table.⁴ In that culture, as even today, meals were all-important social occasions and little was left to chance. People noticed with *whom* you ate, whether you *washed* before eating, and *where* you sat to eat.⁵ All these matters determined your social position both with respect to the host and the wider community. Observing the guests' behaviour, Luke tells us Jesus told a "parable."⁶ This is curious as what Jesus says is really prudent or wise advice, rather than a story; but there's a sting in the tale/tail and – by using that term – we readers are alerted to notice it. It is likely to be about the nature of the Kingdom of God, *not* social etiquette, and *that's* really what this incident is all about! So, let's begin by first hearing again what Jesus said *to the guests*.

"When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do *not* take the place of honour, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this person your seat.' Then, *humiliated*, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honoured in the presence of all the other guests."⁷ A few observations: First, if you *imagine* this scenario, it has wonderful elements of comedy! The social system of "honour and shame" was, however, very important in that culture, as evidenced by this potential game of musical chairs. Second, it sounds to us like Jesus might be cynically saying, "If you are going to play this social game, then be shrewd and play it well so that you come out looking good in public rather than being disgraced!" However, his audience would have realised Jesus was actually echoing the words of wisdom from Proverbs 25: "Do not put yourself forward in the *king's* presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, "Come up here," than to be put lower in the presence of a noble."⁸ Jesus then concludes with his own well-known proverbial saying: "For all those

¹ Luke's gospel has more mealtime scenes than all the others (e.g., 5:29; 7:36; 11:37)! And Jesus tells stories that include meals, like that of the prodigal son (15:11-32), not to forget the post-resurrection meal at Emmaus (24:13-35).

² Luke 14:1. The Greek word indicates it is lunch rather than the larger dinner at the end of the day.

³ Luke 14:2-6 deals with the (controversial) matter of *healing* on the *Sabbath*; see also Luke 6:6-11; 13:10-7. Indeed, it should be noted that Luke repeats in chapter 14 themes already mentioned in chapter 13.

⁴ Luke 14:7. Perhaps Jesus thought this demonstrated the *inauthenticity* of these pious religious leaders.

⁵ See Luke 5:29-32; 7:44-46.

⁶ Luke 14:7b.

⁷ Luke 14:8-10.

⁸ Prov 25:6-7a. In other words, honour is *not* to be gained by seizing prominence; it must be given by others.

who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”⁹ Third, Luke does not record the *guests’* reaction, but I imagine they were squirming in their seats! However, Luke’s *readers* would also make an obvious connection with these words of Jesus from the previous chapter: “There are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last,”¹⁰ and the ominous context for *that* paradoxical saying is the pecking order at the Final Judgement, when the Kingdom of God comes in all its fulness. All this points to the *reversal* of values that is characteristic in the economy of God’s kingdom. Humility is therefore *not* to be feigned as a strategy for recognition. On the contrary, humility is a quality of life open to persons who know that their worth is not measured by recognition from their peers but by the certainty that God has accepted them. The underlying message is, then, to demonstrate genuine *humility* rather than jostle for position in the eyes of God.¹¹

Having addressed the guests, Jesus now addresses the *host*: “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do *not* invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they *may* invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.”¹² One can only imagine that the Pharisee regretted inviting Jesus home for lunch! And we probably would think twice in inviting Jesus home for a meal too. If the lesson to the guests was one of humility, the message to the host was on the nature of hospitality. Acts of hospitality can mask inhospitable intentions; outward appearance may seem to be generous, but the inner motive would be disingenuous if we want some kind of favour to be returned in the future. In total contrast, Jesus advises them *not* to invite the rich and influential just because they *might* return the invitation,¹³ instead we should invite those who *never* had such a feast, those who could *never* return the favour, and who will *never* be our social equals. This message was radically shocking for that audience, just as it is for us today. Remember the host is a “prominent Pharisee,” a pious Jew, well-versed in the Scriptures and who may have prided himself as living a holy and blameless life before God. A key point is the *kind* of people Jesus tells him to invite, namely, “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.”¹⁴ In Leviticus, it is precisely such people who were actually *forbidden* to be priests – on God’s instruction to Moses!¹⁵ Those who were excluded in the past, not through fault of their own,¹⁶ are now to be welcomed. Jesus ends by saying, “Although such people cannot repay

⁹ Luke 14:11.

¹⁰ Luke 13:30; note the future tense and recognise God knows our hearts. This elevation/demotion also echoes some of the words in Mary’s Magnificat (Luke 1:51-53; cf. Luke 4:18-19), i.e., an important Lukan theme. See also Ezek 21:25–26.

¹¹ The Rule of Benedict and other religious orders stressed the practice of humility in our relationship with others as being essential to our coming to an authentic knowledge of God.

¹² Luke 14:12-14a. See also Luke 6:20-26.

¹³ Despite the words of this parable, Jesus is *not* saying that we are to reject family and friends. His words are about “generosity” which is really only self-interest - you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours. That may well bring rewards in this life, but it shouldn’t be confused with investing in God’s kingdom. Give to those who have no way to repay kindness.

¹⁴ Luke 14:13.

¹⁵ Lev 21:17–23. Association with such people was therefore suspect, especially for a ‘holy’ man.

¹⁶ We see it this way today (for various reasons), but early in the Old Testament, these physical ailments and conditions would have been interpreted as divine punishment of some kind of sin (even of distant prior relatives). See Ezek 18 and John 9:2 for evidence this view of God was no longer valid.

you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”¹⁷ Jesus is turning *everything* upside down with his kingdom message!

Someone at the table then says, “Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.”¹⁸ This may have been a polite platitude to deflect from the uncomfortable words Jesus had just said, but it does reveal that he, at least, had made the connection to the great messianic feast that all Jews looked forward to - when God would step into history and finally set things right.¹⁹ We heard some of that expectation in our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 25. And so Jesus responds with a parable about that banquet.²⁰ Let’s consider it briefly and as we do so, let’s remember parables are *not* merely quaint Sunday School stories; they are often challenging, untamed, thinly-disguised critique. And just in case we miss that point, Jesus often said afterwards, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”²¹

A wealthy man is to host a “great” banquet and, in the customs of those days, two invitations were sent out. The first one announces the date of the event, but *not* the time. Given the social etiquette we have just mentioned, everybody who was anybody would definitely accept the invitation to be there! The later, second announcement was to say, “The meal is ready so come quickly and join the party.” It is only then that we hear the three excuses – and all three are pathetically lame. Nobody would buy a field without knowing every detail about it.²² Nobody would buy a team of oxen sight unseen, and even a recent marriage is not a justifiable reason to miss a banquet like this; after all, they’re already in the party mood!²³ These three last-minute rejections, when earlier they said they *would* come, are a social insult to the host. And he understandably gets angry.²⁴ Yet, even after being so rudely snubbed by his peers, the host is still determined to have guests at his banquet - even if he has to find them from unconventional locations. Put another way, his peer’s esteem and approval no longer mattered to him. He rejects the accepted social standards that define their privileged position and, amazingly, he graciously invites “the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.” Even having done that, there is *still* room for more guests. “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.’”²⁵

¹⁷ Luke 14:14.

¹⁸ Luke 14:15. Note the future tense.

¹⁹ See Isa 25:6-9; 49:6; 56:6-8.

²⁰ Luke 14:16-24. See also Matt 22:1-14. Incidentally, this is a *banquet* not merely a *lunch* – the context of this parable!

²¹ Luke 14:35b.

²² Such as: which way it faced to catch the sun, soil quality, water and access availability, its state of maintenance, etc.

²³ Despite Deut 24:5, the third person’s excuse is unacceptable! Often in such stories, the third person’s behavior is the opposite of the first two (e.g., the parable of the good Samaritan). But in this case, the third person *also* reject the invitation and *all* the excuses are pretenses.

²⁴ Luke 14:21.

²⁵ Luke 14:23. The word “compel” has been much misunderstood to imply coercion, even persecution, and needs to be understood contextually. Such lowly people would find it impossible to believe that they are truly welcome at such a meal. The host realizes that and the servant is ordered to “compel” them in the sense that the invitation is serious and genuine. They *are* welcomed, despite their lowly status and being widely as seen as “outsiders” or unworthy of God’s attention.

The man giving the banquet obviously represents God and the originally-invited guests correspond - of course - to people who feel entitled and self-righteous before God, like the Jewish guests at the Pharisee's lunch.²⁶ The first man's excuse allowed claims of *business* to usurp the claims of God; the second man's pretext had *novelty* overrule God's priority. We can make similar excuses today; we can be so immersed with our work and possessions that we have no time to worship, no time to pray, and no time to give God thanks. And, like the third man, we can permit the *good things of life* to crowd out God.²⁷ "Don't be foolish," says Jesus, and don't be distracted and so reject God's invitation. As I mentioned before, a shocking part of the parable are the *kinds* of people God then invites to his banquet; the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. Again, this revolutionary reversal is a feature of the upside-down kingdom of God. But there is more; the sending out of the servant a second time so that the "house may be filled" is taken to mean non-Jews will *also* be at the messianic banquet. This would have been outrageous to Christ's audience at the lunch table. You may ask why that is so when the prophet Isaiah²⁸ makes it clear that "all peoples," including non-Jews, would be at the great banquet. We know from other Jewish writings that by the 1st century many pious Jews rejected that aspect of Isaiah and saw the messianic banquet exclusively for the holy remnant of Jews.²⁹ This parable states that when God's kingdom comes in all its fullness, society's outcasts – including Gentile sinners - will be accepted as equals and the very standards and practices of discrimination will be overthrown. Jesus reasserts Isaiah's oracle, even if his audience has rejected it. Moreover, Luke's *readers* will recognise this parable re-emphasises a key point in the previous chapter, that "people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God,"³⁰ followed again with stress on that radical reversal: "Some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."³¹ If Jesus was trying to make friends and influence people he was blowing it big time at this lunch! He pointedly concludes, "I tell *you all*, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of *my* banquet."³²

While this is a stunning conclusion to this incident, there are several key points to remember. First, those who were first invited and accepted the invitation were themselves the ones who later made excuses and rejected the host, namely God himself. It is *not* God who excluded them from the feast, they *chose it for themselves*.³³ I think this is an important principle that is often overlooked and tells us something of the nature of God. Second, God's amazing *grace* extends to those the religious elite deem

²⁶ We can legitimately infer this from Luke 14:24, when Jesus them as "you (all)" – plural in Greek.

²⁷ Furthermore, consider these (absurd) excuses in the context of Luke 8:14; 12:13–21.

²⁸ Isa 25:6-9; 49:6; 56:6–8. This also fulfils God's promise to Abraham that his descendants would be a blessing to the *world*.

²⁹ From the Aramaic *Targum*, from 1 Enoch 62:1 – 11, and from writings of the Essenes in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Moreover, the Essenes also rejected those with disabilities from the great banquet.

³⁰ Luke 13:29. See also Gen 13:14-17; 28:13-14; Ps 107:3; Isa 43:5-6.

³¹ Luke 13:30.

³² Luke 14:24 (the 'you' is plural); see also 13:22-30, especially 28. Luke's *readers* realise this exclusion is *not* absolute for there were many Jewish Christians by that time. Moreover, Luke's 2nd volume, Acts, outlines the church's mission to non-Jews. Consequently, Christ's message to both Jews and Gentiles was of a warm invitation regardless of cultural, social, ethnic background.

³³ Put a different way: Pious Jews looked for to the day when God would break-in and change history, and when Jesus came and invited them to join his kingdom revolution, they tragically refused the invitation. The poor people from the streets and the alleys, the tax gatherers and the "sinners," all welcomed Jesus in a way in which the orthodox leaders did not.

unworthy of God's love. These recipients could do nothing to deserve an invitation to the banquet; that is what "grace" means, and it turns merit-based religion upside down. *This is wonderful news!* And being truly humble and hospitable means reciprocating that grace to others.³⁴ And it makes us reflect on the kinds of people that might make *us* uncomfortable and hence not made truly welcome at this church. Third, while the parable is essentially about a *future* banquet, the earthly ministry of Jesus shows that the party has *already started*.³⁵ Jesus was welcomed by the poor and marginalised in society and generally rejected by the wealthier Jews and the religious leaders of his day. Not only has the revolutionary upside kingdom of God demonstrably begun in Jesus Christ, there is a stunning link connecting his identity with that of the divine host in the parable, for he ends by talking about "my" banquet.³⁶ Finally, since God's kingdom is compared to a joyful banquet - not rules-based misery - a party to which we are *all* invited, then let us not be foolish and turn down God's invitation but, instead, live celebrating and passing on that gracious invitation on to others! Amen. Let us pray.

³⁴ Luke 14:13-14.

³⁵ This is the so-called "now-and-not-yet" nature of the kingdom of God.

³⁶ Luke 14:14. Hence what is implied by Christ's praxis is made explicit here, together with the earlier references to Isaiah.