

ISAIAH 55:1-7
A GENEROUS GOD!

Four men are sitting in the waiting room of the hospital maternity unit. They are sitting round the room reading books that have been provided by the hospital for just such a time. Their wives are in labour and they are waiting and waiting. Then the midwife bursts into the waiting room: "Mr Smith, your wife has just given birth to a beautiful little girl; come and meet your new daughter" and off they go together. A few moments later, she comes in again: "Mr Jones, your wife has just given birth to twins; come and meet your boys." The other two men look at each other nervously; "I'd be useless in there" says one to the other; "they sent me out to wait here." A few moments later, the midwife comes into waiting room for the third time: "Mr Green, triplets!" and off they go together. After a while, she comes back into the waiting room and starts to tidy up the books that have been left in a heap on the table and she starts to laugh; "What's funny?" asks the remaining father. "Well, Mr Smith was reading *One flew over the cuckoo's nest* and his wife had one baby; Mr Jones was reading *A Tale of Two Cities* and his wife had twins; Mr Green was reading *The Three Musketeers* and his wife had triplets." With this, the remaining father falls to floor, fainted. The nurse picks up the book he's been reading and she finds the title: *Jesus feeds the 5000!*

That is a rather convoluted way to introduce that story and with it, the notion that God provides all that we need. There's a crowd; they've been listening to Jesus teaching; it's getting late in the day, and the people are tired and hungry. Jesus' friends want to send the crowd away, to go home, or to the towns and villages around about to buy food. "You give them something to eat!" Jesus says, but all they know is that it will cost a small fortune to feed this crowd and it's money they don't have! "What do you have?" He asks. "We have a small boy with his packed lunch of five loaves and two fishes." "Sit the people down and we'll see what we can do" says Jesus. He takes the five loaves and two fishes, gives thanks to God and feeds the whole crowd. No-one knows how He did it; we only know that He did this spectacular thing and that there were leftovers. There are all kinds of places in the bible that *tell* us that God provides for us all that we need and that He is generous; in this story, Jesus *shows* us that God provides for us and does it generously!

Imagine yourself in a street market anywhere across North Africa, the Middle East, or Asia; they are selling all kinds of things. There are souvenirs for the tourists and some of these souvenirs are worth buying and some are not. But they are also selling the basic commodities of life: bread, fruit, even water is up for sale and how we resent paying for water when we can simply turn the tap and supposedly have it for free. The cries of these street vendors go up across market: "come, the best bread is here; the purest water; the reddest apples; the sweetest grapes" or whatever it happens to be; "the best bargains are here; come to this stall rather than that stall"; "the best value for money is at this stall".

Isaiah has heard these street vendors and with that picture in mind, says to his people "here is God's blessing for you!" Three times he says "come" and each time he highlights something important about the blessing of God for us:

"Come, all..." (v1a) People are needy; 'thirsty' is often used in the Bible to describe people's deepest needs. The thirsty people are invited to come to have their needs satisfied, to drink. What are we thirsty for? Success, happiness, wealth and prosperity, financial security, fame and popularity, love! Judge for yourself which of these might be

things that never satisfy our deepest thirsts! The deepest thirst of the human heart is for God and for His salvation; we might not put it like that, but that is the way in which we are wired as human beings, to be in harmony with God, to be loved by God and to love Him in return. Come with that thirst and it will be satisfied. We are thirsty; we are people in need.

"You have..." (v1b) the person in need is poor; we have nothing to offer God that will persuade Him to love us; in reality we have made mistakes, we have faults and failings, we have even rebelled against God; we have not been the people we have aspired to become; and so, in ourselves, we have nothing to offer that will persuade God to love us. Here's the truth: that doesn't matter; poverty is no barrier; the person with no money and nothing to offer is welcome at this stall! Here's why...

"Come buy..." (v1c) It is not just water that is on offer at this stall, but the rich blessings of milk and wine and they are all free. There is no need for money; there is no cost; the needy person's thirst is met by grace and the endless love of God for His people. At this market stall, the best blessings are on offer and they are free, given freely by the generous, gracious and loving God.

God's great invitation to the feast is here. *"Listen..." (v2f)* This is all the language of rich food and great blessing; there is nothing mean about the food on offer here. God's blessing is the "richest of fare"; God's blessing is full and generous. So the people are invited; 'listen to this invitation' says the prophet 'and come to God'; God Himself is the richest of fare; God Himself is the blessing; knowing God is life in all its fullness. So the prophet makes it abundantly clear to his people; this is how you will find the blessing of God – *"Seek the..." (v6)* That's all there is to it; there are no great deeds of self-sacrifice for us to make; there is no course on how to be a Christian; simply seek the Lord in faith and ask Him to bless you! Our deepest needs are sorted!

But there's another picture: *"Why spend..." (v2a)* People are going to the stall next door to the bread stall, or to the water seller and they are pulling out wads of cash, or bags of gold and they are buying ashes; they are buying an empty bottle; it is a gold bottle, crusted with precious stones and jewels, but it is empty! The ashes won't satisfy your hunger; an empty bottle won't satisfy your thirst. There was great publicity a couple of weeks ago over people from Largs who won the lottery, £161m; I hope it works for them, but how many lottery winners will tell you that it is the worst thing that ever happened to them; they have lots of money, but it hasn't satisfied their thirst. Superstars who crave fame and the limelight, but when they get there they discover that it is empty and the hotel room after the buzz of the performance is a flat and empty and lonely place to be and so drugs and alcohol become their escape! Or how nice it seems to have a house with twice as many rooms as you will ever need, but it takes two mortgages to buy it and two people working all hours that God gives to meet the payments, and work and the mortgage dominates their life. It is so easy to be caught up in chasing after the wrong things, things that leave us empty and the God who can satisfy our deepest needs is pushed to the side and forgotten about.

Jesus told the story about a banquet. He'd been having dinner with the Pharisee and the talk had turned to food and banquets and dinner parties and one faithful man had said *"Blessed..." (Luke 14:15)* That needs a great "hallelujah" to follow it because it is indeed true that the person who knows the blessing of God is blessed indeed. But Jesus' story acts as a cautionary tale. The man planning the banquet invited the people to come; we imagine they were his friends, neighbours perhaps, certainly people he knew. When the banquet was ready he sent his servant to invite them again *"Come, for..." (14:17)* But

they all began to make excuses: The first had a new field which he must inspect; “do it tomorrow, my friend; it won’t have run away!” The second has some new oxen which he must try out; “test drive them tomorrow.” The third has just got married; “bring your wife with you!” They turned down the invitation and missed out on the banquet and the poor and needy people, people off the streets came, glad of the invitation and they loved the banquet; it brought joy to their hearts!

Missing out on the blessing of God – who would want to do that? From Romans 9, we see how easy it is. *“Theirs is...” (Rom 9:4f)* These are the blessings that belong to the Jews, but comes against the sorrow and anguish of the apostle’s heart because these same people were missing out on the blessing of God because they had not believed Jesus. Adoption is theirs, part of God’s family and they have tasted the grace of God; God is with them and His glory is revealed to them; they have God’s covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David; they have the law; they have worship in the temple; they have people of faith, father figures, to inspire them and guide them; most of all, Jesus is one of them! Yet, they have not listened; when God has said “come” they have said “no!”; when Jesus has said “come to me” they turned away! They missed out on God’s blessing by not listening, by refusing the invitation; yet the generous God leaves the door open!

We have well over a hundred places in the city today open for Christian worship, yet less than four percent of the city’s population will be in Church. We have had the Bible in English for four hundred years, yet less than ten percent of Christians say they read it at all regularly. We have a nation and culture that is built on nearly two thousand years of Christian heritage, yet the culture of our age looks to throw it away in the new mood of secularism. Someone has said that “Christianity is always one generation away from extinction”. That may seem full of pessimism, but two things must happen for every generation: first of all, people must be telling the story of this generous God who has loved us and whose blessing is for us in Jesus; secondly, people must be listening to that story and responding in faith. Whenever we stop telling the story, whenever we stop listening and turn away, then something dies, and the world becomes a darker place.

Let’s end on a positive note – the generosity of God! He gives – all that we need, for even the deepest needs of our lives; He gives the best blessings, the best promises, the best gifts; He gives Himself, because in Jesus God has come into our world to live in the world and is still present by His Spirit; to know God is life in all its fullness. He forgives – all we have to bring to God is ourselves, our flawed, faulted, rebellious, poor, weak, vulnerable, thirsty selves and God blesses us and the first thing He has to do is forgive us and He does that because Jesus died on a cross; so we sing “O generous love” for us, to us; tell somebody else today how generous God is! God says “come”, to a banquet, to delight in the richest of fare. Are you thirsty? There is water, milk and wine on offer on God’s market stall. You have no money? No matter, it’s free! The best banquet is for you and it’s free; the blessing of God, the grace of God is for you and it’s free! What a generous God we have, a God who loves us, who offers Himself to us; “come to me and live; be satisfied; seek me and I will bless you”. It makes our hearts sing to hear these words; listen to this invitation; come and be filled with the blessing of God.