

INVITED TO A BANQUET!  
LUKE 14:15-24

Who would you invite to dinner? Given the chance and free rein, who would be your favourite dinner guest? Maybe there's someone you've been longing to meet, a hero, someone you've admired for years, but never met and you would love to meet them and be in their company for just a little while; so you'd invite them to dinner. Maybe it would be someone from history, a great person who achieved great things, or invented something important. Maybe the person you'd invite is someone that only you know, not famous, but a person who has been significant in your life and you'd like to have the opportunity to say 'thank you' for that significant contribution and the best way you can do that is by inviting them to dinner.

I've been wondering about my answer to that question and so far have not arrived at a particular person. I do have an idea of the kind of person that I would invite. It would not be someone who used this as an opportunity to blow their own trumpet, to hold court with the other guests and no-one else gets chance to contribute; it would not be someone who has all best stories and has done everything better than anyone else. It would need to be someone who was interesting to listen to, but who was humble enough to engage in real conversation, interested in what other people round the table thought, someone who stimulated me in conversation and left me feeling that I had been valued for me and not just for my hospitality.

I wonder what Jesus was like as a dinner guest. He must have had at least several invitations from prominent people in the towns and villages through which he travelled. Why did they invite Him? Were they fascinated by Him, looking for an opportunity to listen to His teaching? Were they hoping to catch Him out in what He said? *"One Sabbath..." (14:1)* Not only was He being watched, but He was watching how other people behaved round the table and what we have in Luke 14 is Jesus' 'table talk'; He is sitting at the table watching and listening to what's going on around Him and then He speaks; He reacts to what He sees; He takes what He sees and uses that as a way of teaching people about life, about faith and what life and faith are like when God is King!

This is a bit different from your dinner party or mine! It is different in two ways: first of all, the house was open to the street and passers-by would poke their heads in at the windows or doors to see what's going on; they would listen to the conversations and that was quite accepted. There were even people who would wander into the house off the street; there are several stories (one in Luke 14 and others later) of people coming to Jesus off the street and He healed them or spoke to them; one woman poured perfume all over His feet on one occasion like this. Secondly, the guests reclined on couches in a U-shape round the table in the middle; they leaned on their left elbow and reached out for the food with their right hand and ate it that way; the most-honoured guest sat in the seat at the centre of the U-shape and the others fitted in round that. It was into this kind of situation that Jesus was invited; He watched what people did, and listened to what they said and then finally spoke some fascinating and powerful words. Would He be your ideal dinner guest? This is all about invitations to the banquet!

Christian faith is like coming to a banquet! That may not be the first notion that springs to mind, but it was an important Bible picture of what life was like when God was king. The Jews thought that when the Messiah came there would be a great banquet when God's people would be able to celebrate and rejoice. All the promises would have come true and the Messiah would be the honoured guest and the people would rejoice. In what way is Christian faith like coming to banquet? Well, God

promises and offers us a whole host of good things in life: He promises to love us, to support and sustain us, to be a rock-like, dependable, trustworthy Saviour and friend; He promises to forgive us our faults and mistakes, to give us peace when we're afraid, to help us and strengthen us when we're weak and vulnerable. If every one of these was like a dish on a menu, there is a real spiritual banquet there for us and we're all invited. It seems not much when read quickly as a list, but there is a real feast of good things. What happens next?

First of all, Jesus watched people scramble for seats round the table. We said that there was a place for the most-honoured guest in the centre, then as you went further away from there, the places became less and less important. So there are two seats left: one near the centre and one at the end of the table: you come into the room; which seat do you take? You have a choice? Do you take the seat at the top, near the centre? It might just be for you! Or do you take place at the end, the lowest place, furthest away from the place of honour? There is a danger in taking the place of honour, because it might not be for you; it might be someone even more important and so you'd be asked to move, down!! Humiliation! But if you take the lowest place you might be asked to move up! Then you'd be honoured and everyone would see. *"For everyone..." (14:11)*

This not just advice on social behaviour. This is a parable which means that Jesus used the story to teach the people a bigger thing. The bigger thing is this: be humble people. Be humble in your attitudes, especially to God. The banquet that God offers is a gift of His generosity. If we claim a place at table by right, then we run the risk of disqualifying ourselves; if we say to God 'I deserve a place because I've been a pillar of the Church for 60 years', or 'I deserve a place because I have a good reputation in the community'; or 'I deserve a place because I'm just such a wonderful person' we run the risk of disqualifying ourselves. If, on other hand, we come with a humble attitude that says 'I know I don't deserve anything, I'll just sit at the bottom table if I can just squeeze in because I know that I'm only there because of your grace' then God will bless us far more richly than we know. *"For everyone..." (14:11)*

You've been invited and it's your turn to invite people to dinner. *"Then Jesus..." (14:12-14)* These are hugely challenging words from Jesus. The very people that no-one invites to dinner, these are the people we should invite if we really want to be generous. You can invite your friends and they will invite you back, but if you really want to behave in a way that reflects what God is like and what God has done, then you invite people no-one else thinks are important. When God is King, His people care for those who are in need; it may not be by inviting them to dinner; it may be by caring for them in some other way. We may care for the poor in our world by giving money, or by the supporting Care Van on our city streets, or some other work of Bethany Trust, or the City Mission. When God is King, we are challenged to look beyond our comfort zones to see the needs of others, especially those we think of as unimportant. The gospel is for everyone!

That's where the story ends, with God inviting to His banquet people that everyone else has written off. Jesus told another story. A man was arranging a banquet and had invited lots of people, his friends perhaps, or all of the local society people in his town. He sent servants round weeks beforehand with invitations and the people all put the date in their diaries and marked it on the kitchen calendars. Then a few days before, he sent his servants round again to remind them; they were treated to a whole litany of excuses: "I've just bought a new piece of real estate on the other side of town and, do you know, that's the very time I have to go to inspect it!" "I've just bought a new car, a new BMW 7 series and its getting delivered at that very time; I'll have to give it a test drive!" "Do you know, I've just got married and I'm not sure that

my wife will want me to go out!” There’s an answer to all of these that exposes all of this as a great excuse: the real estate will still be there next day; you don’t spend £50K on a new car without test driving it first!; you could always bring your wife with you! The master then said: “*Go out...*” (14:21,23) These people were glad to accept the invitation to the banquet and they came gladly to sit at the table and enjoy the banquet.

The people listening to Jesus would not miss the point of what He had just said. There is an invitation to the banquet with the Messiah and the people who will be there are not the people you might expect. To the people sitting round the table - religious people because this was a Pharisee’s house - He is giving a warning: ‘don’t miss the invitation by ignoring the good news, by not listening.’ The people who will come in are the written-off people but they will listen and they will respond. This is all about ways in which people responded then to Jesus: some people thought He was great, they listened to His teaching and it rung bells in their hearts and minds and they believed and followed Him; others thought He was wrong, or they didn’t listen because carpenter from Nazareth and all their prejudices got in the way.

We are all invited to a banquet. There is a whole menu of good things on offer and the offer, the invitation, is not mine to make, but comes from God Himself. The invitation is all about the good things that God has done for us; in the baptism service, we read words that remind us that God has done important things for us before we even know it; “*come, all...*” (Is 55:1) The menu has all the good things of life on it, the best of stuff; “*listen to me... hear me...*” (55:2f) When God is King, there is peace for us, forgiveness, hope, we are loved and accepted; there is grace which loves us when don’t deserve it; there are promises of help and strength, of God being with us always and everywhere to help us with life and the living of life; and all of this is ours, we are invited. So we have a choice with Jesus’ invitation to the banquet: we can say ‘no’; we can also say ‘yes’ and enjoy a whole menu of graces and benefits that are part of life when God is King. Be humble; make no excuses; enjoy the banquet to which we are all invited!