

LUKE 14:15-24
INVITATIONS REFUSED!

Is there an invitation you just couldn't refuse? What would be your chance of a lifetime, an invitation that you just couldn't turn down? It might be dinner with the Queen at Buckingham Palace or Holyrood, or dinner with George Clooney at your favourite Edinburgh eating place? It might be a round of golf with your favourite player; or a seat in the VIP part of the stand at Murrayfield, surrounded by your heroes? Or backstage passes at the Rod Stewart/Bruce Springsteen/1D concert – delete as appropriate! There are invitations which, when we get them, everything else gets put to one side and we are going! Nothing will stop us taking up that invitation because we know it is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to meet someone that we've loved, admired, and respected! Usually these invitations are centred on people, but it could also be an experience that you've always wanted – to climb Everest, to ride the train through the Rockies, to sail to Easter Island; given this invitation, it doesn't seem possible to turn these invitations down!

Yet, bizarrely, we do turn them down! There are once-in-a-lifetime opportunities and we turn them down! Sometimes we turn them down because we're scared but are not prepared to admit to being scared of taking that opportunity, so we make an excuse. There was a once-in-a-lifetime church service for a small village church in the presence of the Queen Mother and people chose not to come; "I'll leave my seat for someone else to come" and there was nothing anti-royal about it, but some other force at work; so the church was only 75% full on a day when it should be bursting at the seams because people chose not to come, and missed a service that was never going to happen ever again! It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity missed. Do we then live with a sense of regret? I don't know! Maybe you're not sensitive to that and you just shrug your shoulders and move on; some people can do that; others live forever with a sense of what might have been, looking over their shoulders and regretting what they've missed.

Jesus spent three years going round inviting people to come to God. "Follow me" – that's how it all started; it was a very simple invitation, but it carried with it so much more than it seems. The basic invitation to people was to follow Jesus. He spoke about bringing in a new kingdom and that this would be time for people to discover something new about God, to come to encounter God in a new way and that following Jesus was at the centre of it all. It is a new relationship: follow Jesus, encounter God. For three years that was His ministry, in different ways and in different places, inviting people to come to God, inviting people by saying "follow me!" Some people said "yes"; some said "no" and He told this story to challenge those who had said "No!"

The story in Luke chapter 14 is a parable: that means it has a point to make and perhaps a very simple point, without all the details in the story meaning something! It is a picture of a banquet, with food everywhere! What's not to like! The banquet is a sign of God's blessing and of people's joy in God; so the people who heard this story would know what lies behind this picture that Jesus is drawing. "Here is a banquet and God is offering you His blessing". The story is about being invited to this banquet and Jesus tells the story of a man who is planning a banquet and has invited lots of people, his friends, maybe some town celebrities, civic leaders, members of his family, some close friends – it is a story and that is all speculation. He invites them; they have said "yes" at the first invitation. The second invitation is extended on the day of the banquet and the servants are sent out again to remind people, but they begin to make excuses: "I have..." (Luke 14:18ff) It is a fine line between reason and excuse; these are all excuses. "I have..." (Luke 14:18) 'Sorry, my friend, but your field will still be there tomorrow; just an excuse'. "I have..." (Luke 14:19) 'That's a major investment; are you

telling me that you made major investment without test-driving these oxen before bought them?' *"I have..." (Luke 14:20)* 'I'm delighted for you; bring your new wife!'

Jesus is challenging those who heard Him. Are your reasons for saying "no" just excuses? If you read the whole story of Jesus' ministry, one of the key pressure points is all to do with the people He meets and spends time with. Jesus spent time with people who were sick and in need and He found a ready audience in the group of people called "the tax-collectors and sinners", a way of describing people who didn't belong to the religious establishment, who didn't fit the profile of the people that God will happily bless! But these were people that responded well to Jesus; they loved Him, they listened to Him, they found a sense of belonging with Him, they discovered the grace of God through Jesus. But that became the 'reason' for others to stay away. The challenge of this story is to these people: is it a reason, or is it an excuse?

Our man in the story sends out new invitations: *"Go out..." (Luke 14:21)* *"Go out..." (Luke 14:23)* The expected guests are not there, so there is now a whole set of unexpected guests being invited to this great banquet; they said "yes" and the banquet was filled. That was exactly what had been happening in Jesus' ministry: unexpected people were finding grace and salvation, people who were sick, social outcasts like the tax-collectors, lepers were being healed. This went on into the first history of the church, that unexpected people heard the gospel and said "yes" to Jesus: slaves, Gentiles, women, as well as some Jews and so the church became this great mix of people from different cultural, social, and ethnic backgrounds. Those who said "no" and made their excuses missed out!

Riding Lights Theatre Company is a brilliant Christian theatre company and they do all kinds of work. They sometimes come to the Fringe and put on performances; if you get the chance to go to see them, take it; they are funny and they tell wonderful stories. We saw them a few years ago in a Fringe show sponsored by the Scottish Bib Society and they were telling Bible stories with a twist. "Who was the first person into paradise?" was the story and they had an angel at the door of heaven as a very proper retired RAF Wing Commander with his twirly moustache, expecting the first person through the curtain and getting very excited about who it would be. Which great and good person would be first through the door? But when that first person came through the door – it was not a celebrity, it was not one of the great and good, but was the person to whom Jesus said *"Today you..." (23:43)* He had been a thief, a man with a dodgy past, a bad reputation, crucified beside Jesus. Our RAF Wing Commander struggled to understand.

I always connect this story in my mind with the fantastic piece we read from Isaiah, some seven hundred years before Jesus; I often wonder if this was the Bible piece in Jesus' mind when He told the story of the banquet! It is such a powerful invitation to a feast. *"Come all..." (Isaiah 55:1)* You are invited to a feast and it is free; you don't need money, but you can come buy and eat; everything on the table is free and it is for you! The piece then moves from the picture, the feast, to the reality of which it wants to speak – God is saying to His people *"Give ear..." (Is 55:3)* "Listen; come to me; get to know me; see how I love you; my love for you never ends; this love I want to extend to you and fill your life with my love; listen to me!" It goes against all the grain of "no such thing as a free lunch!" but here is an offer, an invitation to not just a free lunch, but to a free banquet, a love from God that is free and endless, a relationship with God that is full of blessing, that is life-transforming and it is for us, and it is free!

What do we do with that invitation? "It is too good to be true!" "It is not for me; my life is too messy for God to love me!" Or we ignore it because we don't have time and space in our lives to think about it just now; we'll come back to it later in life, we say. It

is good and it is true – this is the grace of God at work in the world to make us an offer the like of which we have never seen before and will come across nowhere else. It is not first and foremost a religious offer; it is not first and foremost about church; but first and foremost it is about a relationship with God in which He loves us and we learn to love Him back. It is good and it is true. It is for all of us: none of us is perfect; life for all of us is messy at some stage, but the grace of God is for all of us, His love to people who don't deserve it. The thing about this invitation is that it gives value to all the other parts of our life; it shapes and colours every other part of life; giving time and space to this invitation is best thing we will ever do!

I love telling these stories that Jesus told. They are fantastic stories. They are not always easy to understand and explain what they mean, but sometimes telling the story and letting the story loose is a powerful thing in itself. All I can do is tell the story and help us understand what the story is all about. The story itself will make an impact on you if you listen to it; the story itself will challenge you if you listen to it. Here is a man organising a banquet: he cuts an excited figure at the start, this great occasion, and he has invited his friends to share this great day with him. Then he cuts a frustrated figure as people begin to call off, make their excuses and say “no” to his invitation. What does he do? He invites other people, people you wouldn't expect to be invited to a banquet and they come and the room is full and the chatter is deafening as unexpected people say “yes” to an unexpected invitation and enjoy the feast laid out before them.

God loves us with an endless love; He says “*Come to me!*” Jesus invites us “*Follow me!*” These are the best life-invitations we will ever get; these are once-in-a-lifetime opportunities to shape life, to add value to life. All I can do is tell you stories: you have to choose whether to say “yes” or “no” to Jesus; I can't make that choice for you; I can't compel you to make one choice or the other; it is up to you to say “yes” or “no” to Jesus, to follow Him and to find the love of God and life in all its fullness. What will you say to Jesus' invitation?