

“MISSING OUT”
Luke 14:15-24

Have you ever declined an invitation to something and then really regretted it? Saturday 21st June 1975 – I was at university and a bunch of my friends were off to see Elton John at Wembley. Actually, they were off to see Elton John at the very top of his game, along with The Beach Boys, The Eagles, Stackridge, Joe Walsh and Rufus. It was in the days before such stadium gigs were commonplace and looked like being a good day. Did I want a ticket? No thanks. It was the day of the first Cricket World Cup Final on the telly – Australia vs. The West Indies. I spent all day in the darkened and foetid hole that was the television room in our hall of residence. In the end, the Windies won by 17 runs, but it wasn't a real classic. Ever since then I've regretted declining the opportunity of going to Wembley.

Well, here Jesus tells a story of some people who missed out on a great opportunity. He is guest at a meal given by a prominent Pharisee and in the first part of this chapter we read how he comments on the behaviour and attitudes of the other guests as they vied for position around the table. He exposed their motives in inviting each other to their meals, and he counselled humility and hospitality as qualities that would bring long-term, eternal reward.

As he is speaking, another of the guests (a bit like Nigel, the lay reader on *Rev.* or that really annoying person you end up sitting next to at Spring Harvest) pipes up with a rather pious platitude – “*Well, this is a lovely meal, but how wonderful it will be when we are all sitting down at the Kingdom Feast.*” For the Jewish people, the coming Kingdom of God was going to be a wonderful time. Amongst other things, they saw it as a state of celebration, an occasion of joy and fellowship – very much like a feast, an image that is used to describe God's Kingdom many times in the Bible.

Anyway, Jesus tells this story which challenges the guest's sincerity. He says, in effect, “Well, that's a very nice idea, but I bet you'd reject it if you got the chance to go.” This story is another of Jesus' well-known parables. It appears in a slightly different form in Matthew's gospel, where the thrust of it seems a little different. And it is also included in the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*, again with some of the details slightly different.

A man is getting ready to have a banquet and he sends out the preliminary invitations. Invitations in those days were sent out in a kind of two-stage process. The first one came to let you know you were invited, and then someone would come round on the day itself to tell you everything was nearly ready, so it was time to start getting along. It's a bit like preparing for a church event: you let everyone know that something's happening well in advance and sort out people to do specific things, then when you ring round the day before just to check the last minute details, they all begin to remember that they have other things happening which prevent them from coming.

The excuses that are made, however, are obviously bogus. As most commentators point out, you wouldn't buy a field without seeing it, or shell out for five yoke of oxen without testing them. It's a bit like buying a house without seeing it today, or buying a car without having a test-drive. And these guests have known for some time that the feast is happening on this day. As for the one who has just got married, he could have brought his new wife along and shown her off: or, if things weren't working out too well, it would have been a marvellous opportunity to get out of the house for a few hours and leave her there!

Anyway, the host gets understandably upset at this and sends his servants out into the town to bring in the injured and the diseased and the poor – people who would not usually have been invited to such an event. Although those who were specifically invited have refused to come, the feast is going to go ahead anyway. But after this second invitation has gone out, there is still room, so the host tells his servants to get out into the countryside outside the town and “*make them come in*”. It's a word which means “*compel*”: they are to be forced in, almost. When we were on holiday some years ago, we sheltered from the incessant Scottish rain by visiting Inverary Castle, home of the Duke of Argyll. In one of the displays

was his invitation from the Queen to her Coronation in 1953. It began "*Dearest Cousin ...*", but went on to say, in no uncertain terms, that his presence was required and that no excuse would be tolerated. I can't remember the exact words, unfortunately, but the impression was that if he wanted to see 1954 with his head still on his shoulders, he'd better make sure he was there! That's the kind of invitation that was issued to these people who lived beyond the city walls.

The host wants his house to be full. It was perhaps a point of honour for him. He didn't want his neighbours to think he had no friends. It's like the way people are moved around in the House of Commons to give the impression that the chamber is full, or at a sporting event to make it look as if the stadium is full: they're all seated on the side opposite the cameras. I went to Wembley once to see a minor international and was rather surprised to be looking across the ground at rows and rows of empty seats while we were all crammed together opposite the cameras.

Anyway, this parable tells us something about the universality of God's Kingdom. God wants it full and he doesn't mind too much who fills it. The feast is prepared and he wants to make sure that everyone can enjoy it. This doesn't, of course, exclude the idea of his covenant people being there. In fact, they are invited first. But the righteous Jews, the ones whom God first invites to the Kingdom Feast through the covenants of the Old Testament, don't want to come. They have rejected the invitation brought to them in the form of Jesus. They've had their invitation since the time of Abraham, but now that Jesus has arrived to say that everything is ready – "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me ... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour*" – they find that they've got other things to occupy themselves.

So the invitation is sent out to others, to people who are still in the "town", but who are not quite so acceptable, it seems. These are the "*bad Israelites*", as one scholar calls them. They are the tax collectors, the prostitutes, those who are ritually unclean by reason of their leprosy or their deformity or their disability. These are the people with whom Jesus has been eating and talking, and who are the cause of the scorn of the righteous Jews, the Pharisees and the other members of the religious establishment. These people offer no excuses and the Kingdom Feast begins to fill up.

But it is still not full. There is yet room, and God wants as many people as possible to enjoy his favour. So the call goes out beyond the limits of the "town", beyond Israel to the Gentiles. They are to be urged to come in and join the others enjoying all that God has to offer. There are plenty of passages in the Old Testament which look forward to this – verses like *Isaiah 49:6* speak of the nations, the "*goyim*", the Gentiles being admitted to the feast. This is a missionary command, as the Early Church saw it. There is urgency in the call to come and participate in the Feast: after all, it is now, after centuries of preparation, actually ready.

So what's the story all about, then? What does it mean for us today? For the good Jews who reclined around that table listening to Jesus, it was, no doubt, a warning that the Kingdom Feast wasn't going to be quite what they thought. If they did gain access, they might find themselves rubbing shoulders with people they wouldn't normally want to mix with. I remember going to a very grand wedding once when a friend of mine who came from an East End family – his dad was a brickie and Fred was the first boy in the family to make it through secondary school, let alone go to university (a kind of southern Ken Barlow) – was marrying into a very posh family. In fact, he was marrying the sister of one of the very few English tennis stars of past years. The amazing culture clash between the two families at the reception was most entertaining. It was the kind of thing these pious Pharisees would have found very hard to bear.

But this isn't a parable with a lesson only for righteous Jews. There's a more universal message here as well. Whatever the Kingdom Feast is actually like, it's going to be well worth it. We mentioned a bit about this last week as we looked into the vision of God's Kingdom that Isaiah gives us in *Isaiah 35*. It's going to be an amazing experience – and one that goes on and on for eternity. We will be living in the kind of world that God originally intended – a place of peace, of joy, of utter fulfilment and satisfaction.

There will be all that we need – and much, much more besides. We will be free of all the things that currently frustrate and diminish us – there will be no illness, no pain, no sadness, no stress, no selfishness, no evil. It will be utterly brilliant! And we can start to get glimpses of that now, tasters of that abundance and benevolence that God wants to lavish on us all, to experience some of what there is to look forward to.

And the Bible is pretty clear that God really wants everyone to be a part of it. You can't get into the feast without an invitation: but everyone has an invitation. As Paul tells Timothy, "*God our Saviour wants all men to be saved and come to acknowledge of the truth*" (1 Timothy 2:3). No-one remains outside the feast, outside the Kingdom of God, other than those who deliberately choose to, those who refuse the invitation and offer their excuses rather than their grateful acceptance.. The great New Testament scholar, T W Manson, sums it up when he writes: "*Man cannot save himself, but he can damn himself.*"

That's really what makes Jesus' preaching so urgent. The time is getting close: the feast is all prepared and ready for the guests. The initial invitations have been clearly distributed, but now Jesus has come to urge people to come along to the feast. And we are invited to get involved in this kingdom. This knocks Elton John and his support acts into a cocked hat. We have the chance to begin to enjoy the benefits of this Kingdom now. The invitation is there to join in, to start to know the nearness of God, the peace and serenity of his presence, the assurance of forgiveness, the joy of a life that is fulfilled and satisfying because it is lived with the indwelling presence and power of God's Holy Spirit – just a small foretaste of what's to come.

The tragedy in it all is not that men and women are engaged in doing all kinds of things which are against God's will for us as human beings – although that's bad enough. The tragedy is that people are rejecting the invitation. They are making all kinds of excuses for ignoring God's clear and gracious call to them to join him to get involved in the life of this Kingdom. Many people have tried to allegorise the three excuses that Jesus describes here and see in them various foundational sins that men and women are accused of. But these excuses aren't specific kinds of refusal, they're just examples. There are all kinds of things that people use as an excuse for rejecting the clear invitation of God to get involved in the life of his Kingdom – excuses that we use even as those who would call ourselves God's people, just like those pious Jews. Many, many people just say that they haven't got the time – there are too many other demands on their busy lives and as those things, like oxen, fields and wives, are far more tangible and material than talk of this Kingdom, they get the priority. Others believe they're not good enough to be a part of it – but this parable makes it clear that no-one is excluded for that reason. Some say that they have seen the kind of person who is part of the Kingdom, the Christians who are around them, and don't feel they want anything to do with them – which is a ludicrous argument when you consider what God is offering. And others don't want to get involved in the life of God's Kingdom because they feel put off by the perceived threat of persecution or being sidelined: they are always saying things like "Well, they won't let you do that these days" or "Of course, you're not allowed to do that anymore", and they just give up. It's all a load of rubbish, of course, but if you want an excuse not to get involved, then that's as good as any.

God wants you at the feast, he wants you involved in the amazing, fulfilling, joyous life of his Kingdom. And he wants your family, your friends, your neighbours there as well. Are you going to reject him? And if you have accepted the invitation, are you going to urge others to accept it as well? Let's hope and pray that we don't fall into the category of people who hear the invitation, but reject it and lose the wonderful opportunity of enjoying life in God's Kingdom.

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Questions for discussion

1. What would persuade you to tell others about the Kingdom of God?
2. What excuses do people make today for not wanting to accept Jesus' invitation?
3. How can we attempt to persuade people that living God's way is better than living their way?
4. *"Man cannot save himself, but he can damn himself"* (T W Manson). How do you respond to that?
5. If God wants everyone to be saved (1 Timothy 2:3), why doesn't that happen?