

SERMON FOR THE 3RD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (Cape Town - 21 June 2009)

Text: 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 make them come in, so that my house will be full. ²⁴ I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.' (Luke 14:16-24)

The parables of Jesus are very interesting stories. Every time you listen to one of them, they strike a nerve which just makes you sit up and listen. Usually it happens when you begin to realise, maybe halfway through the parable, that this parable is not only the story of somebody else, but also *your* story.

The central theme of Jesus' parables (in general) is invariably the "Kingdom of God". By "kingdom of God" we understand *the process through which God gains total rule over our lives again*. And that is exactly what this parable is all about: Your relationship with God; God becoming your King again.

The first point I would like to highlight in this parable is the "invitational" nature of God's Kingdom.

True to the topic of this Sunday this parable starts off with a great and generous invitation. It is the story of God *inviting* us into his Kingdom. Maybe that doesn't strike you as very special. But if you think about it, a warm, loving invitation is not really the way that God *should* approach us. If we reach Scripture and reflect on our own lives, we soon realise that there is more than enough reason that God should come to us - not with an invitation -, but rather with a "hammer" in hand.

Scripture shows us that God has often used the hammer in the past. One example is the very well-known story of Noah and the great flood. The flood, which over a 40 day period wiped out almost all of mankind, didn't just happen randomly. It was God's reaction on the "evilness" of mankind. In Genesis 6 we read: ***"The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time"*** (v.5). In other words, the nature of man had become rotten to the core. And what was God's reaction? His patience ran out and he became exceedingly angry - and rightly so. And he flooded the world saving only Noah and his family.

But that is not the way we meet God in the New Testament. Since the coming of Jesus God's primary story is one of "invitation". And his invitation is to a "great banquet".

Now we all like banquets or ceremonies, or even the traditional South African “braaivleis”. It is always a highlight if somebody says to me: “Dieter, would you like to come over for a braai”. I don’t think, I ever say “no”. I received such an invitation this last week. I was travelling again and stayed over at a friend’s house in Paulpietersburg. When I arrived, he said: “How about a braai?” Well I can tell you, I was all for this braai. The “starter” was a delicious, tender steak, sliced into juicy thin strips. I ate a lot - far too much. But then followed the main course: It was a huge smoked pork rib together with some cheese tasters. I immediately phoned Maggi, just to tell how happy I am.

This is the analogy that Jesus uses in this parable. God’s kingdom is portrayed in terms of a great feast. God invites you and me to sit at table with him. In ancient times, table fellowship was an expression of great honour. You recognised, you honoured a person by saying: “Would you like to come to my meal?”

This is the way Jesus’ mission is portrayed in the New Testament. God sends his only Son into this world to invite us to God’s great banquet. You can put your own name there. Jesus says to you: “I am inviting you to the eternal banquet with God!” In summary: Jesus’ work is one big invitation.

The second striking feature of this parable is the “rejection” of this invitation.

It comes as a bit of shock. When in this parable the servant of the Lord goes out to all those that had been invited and tells them: “It is ready. You can come now”, they decline, one after the other.

The first one says: **“I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.”** The next one says: **“I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.”** And the third one says: **“I just got married, so I can’t come.”** The food is on the table. The banquet is ready. But they don’t come.

The first two excuses relate to the everyday “working life” of those invited. The one man has bought a field, the other one has bought some oxen. The third man’s excuse relates to “family life”. He has just entered a marriage.

Now both areas of life, work and family, enjoy God’s blessing. God wants us to work. When God created Adam and Eve he gave them a garden to work in. Work is one of the great blessings of God. If you have work you should be happy and praise God, and work hard. Laziness, by the way, is criticised by God. Paul writes to the Thessalonians: **“If a man will not work, he shall not eat”** (2 Thess.3:10). Work is important.

The same applies to family life. God himself instituted marriage. And like the work we do, he blessed marriage. As we make time to work, God wants us to make time for our

families. If you are a workaholic, never make time for your spouse, never make time for you children, you got it all wrong. God gave you a family to love and to care for.

So what is the problem in this parable? The problem is that God is pushed to the back of the line all the time. The men in this story are not impolite. In fact the first two explicitly say: **“Please excuse me”**. In others words: “Sorry, I can’t come now, but the next time I may come”.

This is a reaction to God which can become a pattern. And if it does become a pattern, it says something about your heart. Jesus says in Luke 12: **“For where your treasure is, there your heart will also be”**. And it happens so easily, almost unnoticeable: Your work becomes your treasure, or your family life becomes your treasure. And God is just pushed down the line.

This is sad. This is sad, because the “stuff” of this world, how important they also may be, do not last. The big house I am aiming for, will one day just be rubble. Not even my family I can keep. The only thing that lasts, is my treasure in heaven, my relationship with God.

Let me remind you of what Martin Luther wrote in his explanation to the first commandment, **“You shall have no other gods”**. He does *not* write: It is wrong to love you family or to trust your friends or to work hard. He said, we keep this commandment if we fear, love, and trust God “more” than, or “above” all these things.

God is inviting you into his life. There is going to be a great banquet. Are you pushing him down the line?

What is God’s reaction when it happens? What does the master in this parable do when the invitation is rejected? Does he lash out? Does he take your work or your family away? Does he stop “blessing” you. No he doesn’t. But with his kingdom, he moves on.

He calls his servant and says: **“Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.”** (v.21). And by the way, that is exactly what Jesus did. When the Pharisees and scribes, the religious leaders of Israel, did not accept HIM, he just moved on to those whom they excluded. Interestingly, the poor, the cripple, the blind, and the lame, were those who were all barred from entering the temple. But Jesus went looking for these marginalised people and said: “There is a great banquet, would you like to come?” And the parable indicates, they came.

When the banquet was still not full, the master send out his servant again. This time to those *outside* of the city (that is, the heathens) on the roads and the country lanes, and said: “Would you like to come?” And again the parable indicates: They came.

What do we learn? Martin Luther explained it with the concept of the highfield thunderstorm. He wrote: ***“When people no longer respond in genuine faith to the shower of the gospel upon their dry land, Christ and his gospel move on to other venues.”*** In other words, when God’s invitation is not accepted, he just moves on, and looks for people that will accept. *God wants his house to be full.* He send Christ as salvation for all people. If you don’t accept, he looks for others. It makes you think, if you realise that this parable was addressed to a Pharisee, someone who was a regular temple visitor, a regular “church goer” - and he did not accept this invitation.

Let me conclude with one more question: How does God’s invitation come to us today, and how does it come to others? It comes to us here, where we gather in church every Sunday. And it comes to others through us. Throughout the history of the church, Jesus has always relied on his “disciples” to bring his invitation to God’s banquet to others. The danger is that we restrict this invitation only to those with whom we feel comfortable with, our family members and closest acquaintances. The rule applies: If they don’t listen, you go to others - from all walks of life. *God wants his house to be full.* Those who have accepted his invitation are also the ones that invite others. That is our challenge and our joy. Amen.

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