

FOCUS: Jesus invites every one of us into the joy of his resurrection victory over death. It is our response which will include or exclude us and being included means inviting others.

FUNCTION: To encourage each hearer to respond to Jesus' invitation and include themselves and other in his joy.

1. Intro

It always feels like a special privilege to preach on Easter Sunday. The day we celebrate the event that changed everything forever! Jesus fights death and wins! Comes to life, a new kind of life! Makes it possible for human beings to do the same. The bible verse which sums up everything for me so meaningfully and so helpfully that it's one of my all-time favourites –

*[L]et us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. **For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*** Hebrews 12:1-2 NIV

Have been exploring parables – (Go through?) The parable we are exploring this morning, our final one, is a story Jesus told about that future joy set before him and the question of who will be there to celebrate it with him.

2. Come to the banquet...

Jesus is having a meal at “a prominent Pharisee's house” ...

¹² Then Jesus spoke to his host. “Suppose you give a lunch or a dinner,” he said. “Do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, or your relatives, or your rich neighbours. If you do, they may invite you to eat with them. So you will be paid back. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite those who are poor. Also invite those who can't see or walk. ¹⁴ Then you will be blessed. Your guests can't pay you back. But you will be paid back when those who are right with God rise from the dead.”

¹⁵ One of the people at the table with Jesus heard him say those things. So he said to Jesus, “Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in God's kingdom.”

¹⁶ Jesus replied, “A certain man was preparing a great banquet. He invited many guests. ¹⁷ Then the day of the banquet arrived. He sent his servant to those who had been invited. The servant told them, ‘Come. Everything is ready now.’

¹⁸ “But they all had the same idea. They began to make excuses. The first one said, ‘I have just bought a field. I have to go and see it. Please excuse me.’

“Another said, ‘I have just bought five pairs of oxen. 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. He ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the town. Bring in those who are poor. Also bring those who can’t see or walk.’*

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. Go out to the country lanes. Make the people come in. I want my house to be full. ²⁴ I tell you, not one of those people who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.’ ”*

A few cultural insights to help us understand –

- A banquet or feast in 1st century ME not for entertaining friends but for creating and maintaining social status. Who the host invited was a clear statement both of his own status and the status of those he invited. Everyone knew the significance of every seat in the room, some even had special names.
- Hospitality had clear rules. Guests must honour the host, defer to the host, accept everything the host offers. Hosts must honour their guests, protect guests honour from others (difficult if a dispute broke out), give guests the precedence they are due, give guests the best they have.
- Invitations had two stages – initial invite, and announcement that all is ready (come to the table). Time less exact!

In this parable, all the guests had received and accepted the initial invite, the host has gone ahead and prepared. When he sends to say dinner is ready - *they all had the same idea. They began to make excuses.* This is not just 3 guests for whom things had unavoidably come up! This is a strategically planned social sabotage of the host. They are deliberately breaking all of the hospitality rules at once in an attempt to shame the host at his own banquet. Even today, we feel it when someone breaks the rules. [A friend of ours had an 18th for his son, at last minute someone else had a party on the same night and majority of guests said they could no longer come. This poor 18 yo was given a pretty clear message about his social status!]

So the host in our parable has a choice. He can wear the shame. He can seek social revenge. Instead he decides to completely overturn the whole system (an unexpected, courageous choice!). Like the vineyard owner from Friday’s parable, he decides to process his anger into grace. He invites people who he knows don’t expect an invitation and would never be able to repay the favour, who will harm rather than enhance his social standing. (Sidenote – “make them come in”, other trans “compel them” – more appropriate word – urge, convince – why? Because this invitation is so out of the ordinary that these guests would be flabbergasted, wary, even suspicious of an invitation to a nobleman’s banquet, first answer is probably no thanks! – they need convincing that it is genuine.)

3. Promise of the Messianic banquet

Another piece of the puzzle here is Jesus’ picture of the banquet. This isn’t a metaphor plucked out of the air – it is an established part of Jewish spiritual and cultural understanding which begins 100s of years earlier. We find it in Isaiah 25 –

On Mount Zion the LORD who rules over all will prepare a feast for all the nations.

The best and richest foods and the finest aged wines will be served.

⁷*On that mountain the LORD will destroy the veil of sadness that covers all the nations.*

He will destroy the gloom that is spread over everyone. ⁸He will swallow up death forever.

The LORD and King will wipe away the tears from everyone’s face.

He will remove the shame of his people from the whole earth. The LORD has spoken. NIRV Is 25:6-8

Isn't that beautiful? This is a picture of the joy that will be experienced when the Messiah comes to rescue and restore, not just Israel, but all nations. The banquet or feast represents the celebration that will occur when the LORD will deal with all fear and sadness, and death is beaten, swallowed up, forever. We are still waiting for that final celebration but we rejoice that we now know how it will come about – Jesus' resurrection which we remember today!

So this picture was strong in the minds of those who were eating with Jesus the day he told this story. The meaning had gotten a bit twisted out of shape over the centuries. Many Jews believed that the prophecy did not include Gentiles (all nations), some believed that it did but that the Gentiles would be judged at this banquet, not accepted. One of the Dead Sea Scrolls, of the Qumran community, declares that no-one can attend the Messianic banquet if they are 'paralysed in ... feet or hands, or lame, or deaf or blind or dumb or smitten in [their flesh] with a visible blemish' (Bailey, 311)

So the beautiful vision of an all inclusive celebration has become a mark of exclusivity. Out of this understanding comes the guest's comment, "*Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in God's kingdom.*" - a comment perhaps made regularly at feasts and banquets. The conventional expected response would be something like – "*May we be among the righteous who sit at that table*" But Jesus goes for the jugular with a story that overturns all these expectations! Not only are all welcome but the ones who assumed they had a place will not get the smallest taste of the banquet. So the central question / challenge of this parable is simply – **Who will be present?** Or more pointedly – will you, the listener, be present?

4. Who will be present?

Every guest invited to this banquet responds according to their assumptions as to who will be present. The first invited guests assume that their invite is there for the taking. They've received the first invitation, now they can do what they like with it, it's sure enough even to exploit for social advantage. After all there's bound to be another invite to accept later isn't there? Perhaps these excuses are genuine, though it's unlikely. Perhaps there are simply priorities that rank higher than the banquet right now – home and family, building wealth.

Does any of this ring true for you? Do you have a plan to really devote yourself to living for Jesus at some time in the future when there's less going on in your life? After yr 12, or after uni, after you've established yourself careerwise or after the kids are older? What if that time never comes? What if the time is now?

The later guests also make assumptions. All that fancy banquetting's not for the likes of me! No-one would want me there. I couldn't possibly be invited to something so grand or intimidating as a banquet and thank goodness for that! I have nothing to wear or to bring, I'll embarrass myself! What if I'm somehow expected to repay this? How can we know these thoughts are there for the last guests? The host anticipates it. He tells the servant he is going to need to urge, to convince, to persuade them – effectively, don't take no for an answer!

Does this ring true for you at all? Do you find it hard to believe that God really wants you? Are you afraid of the possible consequences of tossing in everything with Jesus? What will he want from you – time, money, a whole uncomfortable transformation of who you are and how you see yourself? Do you feel inadequate for the invitation? Does this make you hang back, or even say no? Perhaps you have plans to follow Jesus later when you have everything more together. What if the time to say yes is now?

All potential guests with assumptions, listen to the words of Revelation 19:6-9 –

⁶ Then I heard again what sounded like the shout of a vast crowd or the roar of mighty ocean waves or the crash of loud thunder:

“Praise the LORD! For the Lord our God,^[a] the Almighty, reigns.

⁷ Let us be glad and rejoice, and let us give honour to him.

For the time has come for the wedding feast of the Lamb, and his bride has prepared herself.

⁸ She has been given the finest of pure white linen to wear.

For the fine linen represents the good deeds of God’s holy people.

⁹ And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb.” And he added, “These are true words that come from God.”

Did you notice these are virtually the same as the words uttered by the guest at the dinner for Jesus? Yet these words are not a pious wish but an invitation for everyone! And all we need to do is accept the invitation! As Jesus rose from the dead, he made it possible for anyone, anyone who chooses him, to be present at his wedding banquet. All we need to do is actually choose him, with our hearts, our minds, our wills, with our whole lives.

5. There is still room...

I have a favourite character in this story and I haven’t mentioned him yet. Perhaps I’m filling in the gaps, but I feel as though the master’s servant is having the most exciting day ever! It started badly – all these rude entitled guests throwing his master’s invite back in his face. But then, instead of wreaking revenge, his master channels his anger into grace and the servant gets to deliver this grace far and wide. Perhaps he gets to invite a whole crowd of his friends and relatives, perhaps it’s just the joy of delivering surprising good news (that’s always fun). He gets to the task so enthusiastically, the story jumps ahead. “Done!” he declares to his master, “but there is still room!” Is there a suggestion in his words? “Then go and find more and urge them to come!” says the master and away he hurries to find some more, for whom the news is so surprising, he has to work at convincing them he is for real!

NTW – *“It isn’t enough to say that we ourselves are the people dragged in from the country lanes, to our surprise, to enjoy God’s party. That may be true but party guests are then expected to become party hosts in their turn”*. Luke for Everyone, 179.

If already accepted invite, already Jesus followers, then task = invite others. Still in middle of story, invite is open –still room! Just like servant, called to find more guests /convince them to come to Jesus’ banquet. Maybe already people in your life that assume not invited / need some urging. Pray, speak to them. There is still room.

6. Response

Let me read you the verse we started with –

*[L]et us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. **For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*** Hebrews 12:1-2 NIV

The risen Lord Jesus invites us today to join in with the joy set before him, to run with perseverance, fix our eyes on him, to feast and celebrate with him for eternity, and to join the task of bringing others along.

We have an opportunity to respond now to Jesus’ invitation as we listen to Jane and Jess bring us a song.