

EXCUSES, EXCUSES!

Evensong Trinity 5 22 June 2008

I think most of us here in 21st century Northumberland miss the real importance that is attached to the duty of hospitality in the Middle East even today. I have heard of a hated enemy being discovered in the desert, almost dead from hunger and thirst and heat stroke. The adversary actually invited him in to the great tent and fed him and cared for him. When he was well again, he sent him off, saying that the next time they met, one of them would surely die.

The rules of hospitality are complicated but binding and they were in the time of Jesus. We can all recall the rules about provisioning a marriage celebration, at Cana.

As I was saying this morning, so often in the New Testament, Jesus turns the accepted rules upside down. In our New Testament reading, Jesus knew that the host had invited his guests for two reasons: (1) to pay them back because they had invited him to past feasts, or (2) to put them under his debt so that *they* would invite **him** to future feasts. This hospitality was not an expression of love and grace but rather an evidence of pride and selfishness. He was “buying” recognition. So Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

They must have thought that he was truly mad. If you owned property, it was your great joy to show it off and to invite all your equals and your betters, to establish your position in society. What on earth was the point of giving expensive food and hospitality to people who could do no good to your reputation, who couldn't even give you a leg up, let alone give you a meal in return, as the rules demanded? You see, in our Lord's time, it was not considered proper to ask poor people and handicapped people to public banquets. (The women were not invited either of course!) But Jesus **commanded** us to put these needy people at the top of our guest list *because* they cannot pay us back. If our hearts are right, God will see to it that we are properly rewarded, though getting a reward **must not be the motive for our generosity**. When we serve others from unselfish hearts, we are laying up treasures in heaven.

The point was - Your reward would be in heaven - but not everyone there appreciated this.

And then one of the guests - perhaps trying to prove that he was really a man of great faith - or

trying to butter Jesus up - said: "blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God."

Jesus does not comment on the individual's reasons for this statement but he does launch into a parable called "the Great Banquet". One could go on at great length over the meaning behind the various excuses that were given - and if you wish I am actually prepared to do so - no, I see that you would rather leave it to another occasion! So I will cut to what I feel is the heart of the story.

The whole thrust of Jesus' comments at this meal are ALL about motives. The motive for giving hospitality - is it all about rules, and gain and preferment? Or is it about generosity, reflecting the amazing generosity of God.

And when those invited start to offer their excuses - what do we think about that today? And, more importantly, what did the guests at the meal think? Do they regard them as legitimate reasons for their non-attendance? Are they perfectly proper reasons that Jesus quotes? Or are they put forward as excuses born of indifference? Some New Testament commentators accept that they are really valid reasons for inability to attend, reasons which would have been accepted by any reasonable man of property. Business deals needed to be completed before the end of the day and that inspection of the merchandise should take place as soon as possible after the deal itself had been agreed. The excuses in the parable are a bit like those of [Deut 20:5-7](#) that allow reasons for not answering the call to take part in a holy war.

But closer examination shows that this does not really hold water. The third excuse might just fall within the Old Testament reason for being excused from doing one's duty in the Holy War - but it would not be accepted in the context of the receipt of an offer of hospitality. Most commentators agree with me (ahem) that Jesus thinks little of these so called reasons - he treats them as very contrived and lame excuses. Within the story, the excuses appear valid to those who make them and they therefore assume that they will be acceptable to the host.

But no - there is anger and hostility. His severe reaction no doubt caught them by surprise. Where did they go wrong? They did have these outside commitments. What were they supposed to do? They mistook the importance of the summons. They simply got their priorities wrong.

So, instead of all the great and the good being called to the wedding - they had shot their bolt. No further invitation, no second chance - and the invitation was sent out to all and sundry. People who do not count in the eyes of the world. The invitation was issued to the outsiders

of the city and then to those who inhabited the country, to those who lived rough in the lanes.

Indeed, the summons was so urgent that the host said that his servants should **compel** folk to come in. Jesus, in Luke's account, shows that the Kingdom is not only for Jews, the self regarding hard hearted ritualists, but it is for the Gentiles too.

The hearers at this rather posh home of the Pharisee would have got the point. Wm Barclay comments that a Jewish story, which goes back at least to the fifth century BC, and could be based on earlier tradition, tells of an ambitious tax collector who tried to gain social standing with the traditional aristocrats by inviting them to dinner but was harshly rebuffed by them. So that the meal might not be wasted he invited the poor instead. There is a good chance that the story was known in the time of Jesus, and it throws an interesting light on his parable.

The Jews, the people of God, were failing to see either the truth in Jesus or the urgency of his call. They were in danger of excluding themselves from God's grace altogether, and of negating the covenant itself. But although the danger was great, and Jesus was being as clear as he could be, they really shut their ears to his message.

So what of us today? Do we really accept the importance and the urgency of the summons?

There is a story of an artist who wanted a model for the Prodigal Son, the boy in the Bible who takes his inheritance and runs away from home and blows it on parties and hookers and ends up destitute and slopping pigs to survive. The artist went to many institutions and prisons, but could not get a man who suited his ideas of the Prodigal. One day while walking down the street, he met a poor miserable tramp, and he suited the artist's eye, so he asked him if he would be willing to sit for his portrait. The tramp said he would, if the artist would pay him for it. The artist promised and set a day and hour for him to come. At the appointed time, when the artist was sitting in his studio, the man came in, but he was so well dressed, the artist didn't know him, and told him he had no appointment with him. When the beggar told him the circumstances, the artist said, "What have you been doing?" "Why," said the man, "I thought if I was going to sit for my portrait, I would get a new suit of clothes." "Ah," said the artist, "you won't do now; I wanted you just as you were." Appearances again - Hyacinth Bouquet again.

It is a very much come as you are invitation to the Kingdom of Heaven.

This is a short extract from a sermon on the web on this text.

The Scripture says, "They began to make excuses." If those men had been invited to clean lavatories, if they had been invited to go to a hospital to witness some terrible

operation, or if they had been invited to an execution, they would have had some reason for giving excuses; but these men were invited to a royal feast. It is not often that common people like you and me get an invitation to a royal feast. If Queen Elizabeth were to invite us to a feast at Windsor Castle, do you think we'd regard that as a huge honour? Do you suppose you would make excuses?

It is a come as you are invitation from the Creator of the universe himself.

There is a great temptation to say that because we come to church we are 'alright Jack'. We may be in danger of being like the Jews of Jesus' day. If we have not realized the amazing generosity of God and the grace that he gives, we may not have truly given ourselves to him - ourselves, our souls and bodies.

*He dropped a penny in the plate
And meekly raised his eyes,
Glad the week's rent was duly paid
For mansions in the skies.*

A Victorian poem - and it centres on giving, and certainty, our wallets, our handbags, are part of the invitation and the response. I won't bang on about that - I will leave it with each of us for thought. It is so easy to offer rational and reasonable explanations for not committing fully to God, like the first three guests. But really, All that I am, all that I have? That is the way to reply to the invitation to the banquet of heaven.

And then another thing. Is Jesus really telling us not to entertain friends and family? Is he such a killjoy? No, Jesus does not prohibit us from entertaining family and friends, but He warns us against entertaining *only* family and friends exclusively and habitually. That kind of "fellowship" quickly degenerates into a "mutual admiration society" in which each one tries to outdo the others and no one dares to break the cycle. We need to notice this in the context of our own church social life. When we have coffee, we talk to the people we know, instead of going to welcome the stranger. When we have church 'do', we tend to invite and welcome the same people.

There is going to be a 'Back to Church Sunday' on 28th September. I want to challenge you to invite people you **don't** know - just a couple. Neighbours perhaps, or people you only know by sight. At this stage I do not suggest that we go out and physically **compel** them to come to God's house to hear the gospel message at the Master in the parable did - but we should be insistent and persistent in our entreaty - in a different parable, Jesus reminded us how this sort of approach can bear fruit.

