

The Wedding Banquet transforms ...

... but only if we make space for others

A sermon given on the Eleventh Sunday of Trinity, 28th August 2022 – by the Vicar the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Well this morning's gospel is all about a wedding banquet, and wedding banquets have been much in my mind lately, as my daughter Lucy got married a week ago in Hereford. And like all weddings, there was a long build-up and much planning, not least in organising the seating plan. A great deal of thought went into that question of who do you seat next to whom? What do you do with the guest who doesn't know anyone else, or who's deaf, or who has a tendency to express provocative opinions? Many of you, I'm sure, will have been there. Thankfully, nobody stood up at the start of the meal and objected, saying, "I want to sit there", pointing to the empty places reserved for the bride and groom. And nobody objected to the meal, saying, "I want her plate because she's got a bigger portion than me." Imagine the chaos if everyone was jostling for what they thought was the best seat, or if they were arguing over who had the biggest portion. But thankfully, everybody was a well-behaved guest. And one of the qualities of a well behaved guest is that you trust you will be looked after. You trust that the host will have thought about everything and made sure everyone has what they need and that everyone will be made welcome and accommodated. It's not a setting in which people are expected to assert themselves and try to put themselves first.

And perhaps this is one of the reasons why Jesus repeatedly uses the wedding banquet as an image of the kingdom of God. At the punchline of the story, Jesus says, *"All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."* It's part of that wonderful Gospel thread running throughout the New Testament, which teaches that the first will be last and the last first; that the hungry will be filled and the rich sent empty away; that the powerful will be cast down and the lowly lifted up; that the meek will be the ones who inherit the earth; and the least among you is the greatest. The wedding banquet is this wonderful image of feasting and laughter and music and joy, all celebrating covenant love - the love that is shaped by promises and faithfulness. It's a wonderful image of God's love, an image

that is welcoming and inclusive. There is room for everyone and all you have to do is say 'yes' to the invitation and turn up.

But this image of God's kingdom as a wedding banquet only works if two things are in place. First of all, there has to be a host looking after everyone. And secondly, the guests have to behave like guests and not think that the places and resources are limited and therefore have to be fought over. I wonder if you remember another story about a wedding at Cana of Galilee, where there was a shortage of resources and Jesus revealed his glory by providing a superabundance of wine. There is no shortage of God's mercy; there is no shortage of God's grace; God's compassion and faithfulness will never run out. But we do have to trust that there is a host there, who is thinking about us. And we do have to accept that others are just as welcome at this banquet as we are.

Sadly, it seems we very rarely think of the world as a wedding banquet. Most of the time, we don't really believe there is a loving host. And so we feel we have to seize our place at the banquet for ourselves and assert ourselves in competition with others. If there is no host, or the host isn't taken seriously, the result is chaos and strife as everyone tries to grab the best seats and the resources do indeed run out because the strongest and greediest have grabbed it all for themselves. The war in Ukraine is an extreme example of what can happen when people refuse to believe in the gracious provision of the host. And we should be wary of any politician who seeks to appeal to their own base by running down another group, particularly if the other group is weaker or marginalised. In fact, the world is so successful at ignoring the host that not only do two thirds of the world's population find themselves excluded from the banquet and have barely enough to exist on, but they have become so excluded as to become virtually invisible so that the richest third can convince themselves that they are the only ones who really matter.

The flip side of this is that when the host is trusted, the guests can relax and become less fearful of each other and actually make room for others and share what we've been given. So Jesus says, *"When you give a banquet yourself, don't just invite your friends and relations and rich neighbours. Invite the poor, the disabled, the lame and the blind."* - Widen the boundaries of hospitality and inclusion.

I had my own very small taste of this at Lucy and Pete's wedding because among the guests were several friends of the groom, whom I also happened to know: except the last time I saw them, I was making two of them redundant and firing a third for gross misconduct. And there they all were, turning up at my daughter's wedding. That could have been very awkward, but actually it was fine because they were all behaving, not as people bearing ill-will, but as guests at a wedding, as people who were included and honoured.

Knowing that we are honoured guests ourselves makes it easier to invite others to come and join us and to make space for them alongside us. And so, as we receive communion at the Lord's table this morning, we are invited to share in the wedding banquet of the Lamb, a foretaste of that heavenly feast celebrating God's victory over all the powers of death and darkness.

But this feast can only transform you and me if we receive the invitation in humility; if we understand it isn't because we are entitled or have any merit of our own, but only because the host is generous and loving who longs to include more and more people on his seating plan and whose kingdom depends on you and me making space for others.

Reading Text

Luke 14:1, 7-14

¹ *On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.*

⁷ *When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable. ⁸ 'When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹ and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, "Give this person your place", and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, "Friend, move up higher"; then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹ For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'* ¹² *He said also to the one who had invited him, 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'*