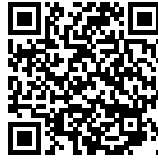




THE GREAT BANQUET

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The story is told of a young man who lived a long time ago in Southern England. He had heard of a huge white horse which had been mysteriously carved into an unknown hillside centuries ago.

He was so captivated by this rumour that he set off in search of the fabled horse, travelling the full length and breadth of Southern England. But alas, he could not find it. Eventually he returns home disappointed, concluding that the white horse of his dreams didn't exist, after all.

Then one day as he surveyed his own village after climbing a very tall tree and getting a good vantage point, he was astonished to see the object of his search. The White Horse had been there all the time. In fact, his village lay at the very centre of it, but he'd never been able to recognise it before, concealed as it was among the fields, trees and rivers.

The point of that story is that people particularly young people, set off on quests, like travelling the world, going to exotic places, sampling foreign cultures, do so as they look for answers about life. Sadly, in spite of all their efforts and as time goes by, they can become, increasingly disillusioned, cynical or agnostic. They don't find the utopia, the 'White Horse' they're searching for.

Perhaps, they need to return home. Maybe if they did, they would be amazed to find that the answers they're looking for are there already, as close as the bible on the book shelf, or the church on the street corner. They simply haven't recognised the unique value of these things because they are too common place, too familiar. Familiarity breeds contempt.

To try to break down such a wall of indifference, or even contempt, and to help people discover the importance and the relevance of the Christian message, is not an easy task.

This is especially so when many people think they know that message already. It's a bit like the measles vaccination given to babies. All too often a dose of religion, especially if given in childhood, simply increases your resistance to the real thing when you encounter it later in life. Sunday School Exams, Unhelpful RE teachers at school, tedious morning assemblies in chapel, and the minister's boring monologues.

They all come back into your mind like a flood, immediately an evangelist stands up to speak. 'Oh no, not again'.

It's like antibodies descending upon some invading virus in your blood stream. Those memories all conspire to ensure your spiritual immunity to everything that preacher might want to say. Even the best sermons fail to penetrate such defences.

If you don't believe me. Read what Jesus says. As the world's greatest biblical teacher and evangelist, he experienced the exact same problem. Frequently the people he had the hardest trouble with, were those with strong religious backgrounds, who carried round the biggest copy of the Torah they could get their hands on. And who looked the part.

It's the Sabbath Day. Jesus has been invited to have a meal at the home of a 'prominent Pharisee.' Someone who comes from a strong religious background.

Everybody is wary of each other, at this nibbles and wine function; all trying hard to make a good impression. Vying for position. Jesus of course knows this so he tries to change the atmosphere by offering some controversial advice on how to organise a really good dinner party.

Don't invite wealthy friends and neighbours, they're boring he says. Instead invite the homeless youngsters and street kids you see begging on the streets. Invite the poor, the destitute, the crippled and you will be blessed. I'm sure Jesus' words went down like a lead balloon. This was a real conversation stopper. As Jesus looked round upon the gathering, he would have noticed that there were NO street kids, poor people, or the homeless there.

During the awkward silence there is usually someone around who makes some wise comment to try and keep the conversation within everyone's comfort zone. There was such a guy at Jesus' table who adds his own pious comment; 'blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.' We can just picture him can't we. Measured, all the religious trappings, nodding head, full beard.

It was a coded way of saying, 'oh you don't have to worry about me Jesus, I'm very religious. I know all about the kingdom'. Now he may have been expecting Jesus reply; Amen brother, well said or a hallelujah'. But he miscalculated. Jesus was far too shrewd to be deceived by his hypocrisy and far too good a teacher to allow it to pass unchallenged.

You see this was a classic case of familiarity breeding contempt. This guy thought he was spiritually ok. He knew about and believed in heaven and was quite sure he was going there.

He naturally assumed Jesus would want to support him. But Jesus doesn't. Instead Jesus thinks quickly and tells a close to the bone story. And no doubt everyone in the group is all ears.

Jesus starts telling the story which has a strong Old Testament theme about the prophets preaching preparing the way for the coming Kingdom. All good so far, they think. But then Jesus veers off in a slightly different direction. He says; 'at the time of the banquet he (God) sent his servant (Jesus) to tell those who had been invited, come for everything is now ready.'

The kingdom of God is here. Don't have to wait any more. It's arrived. Therefore, time to act and enter. Everything is ready, come on in.

But then read what happens. But they all began to make excuses. Yes excuses. The first one said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see to it. Please excuse me'. Second one said; 'I have just been to the market and bought oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me'. Another said; 'I just got married; so, I can't come either'.

The amazing thing in all of this, is that people could be personally invited by Jesus to share in the kingdom of God and his promise of eternal life in heaven. And yet decline. They say NO thanks. It doesn't add up. It's not being arrogant, it's just plain stupid. It's like buying an expensive house without even looking at it. Or buying 10 oxen without seeing whether or not any of them were lame. In fact, these excuses that are offered are so flimsy they cannot be even regarded as real excuses.

Jesus is saying that when men and women turn their backs on the kingdom of God and the joy of heaven, they do so for the sake of mere trivialities. Like the pursuit of material gain, personal adventure, or sexual desire.

They choose such things above accepting God's gracious invitation. Especially now perhaps more than ever, there are far too many counter-attractions bidding for the time, money, and attention of people. They may have been interested in going to the party once, but all sorts of things have invaded their life since then. What flimsy excuse are you the reader holding on to that is preventing you from entering God's kingdom?

The so-called religious people Jesus is saying will be excluded; because they are basing their faith on their religious pedigree, or their back ground.

Well, then, who is to be included? Those who will be at the great banquet will be the poor, the crippled, the lame, the outcast, the destitute. Those who you least expect will be there, many of whom have no religious back grounds at all. And they haven't offered any excuses to Jesus.

Having wealth, being busy with various interests even though they are good and wholesome like our family, can be obstacles, and distractions. And we use them as excuses. I'm too busy lord. I've to get my family through university; I've to move house, go on a holiday, change jobs. Go into a nursing home.

These poor and destitute people who have nothing to distract them or invade their personal lives will be there. But the good news is there is still room for many more. Jesus is saying the kingdom of God will be removed from you Jews, because of your hardness of heart and your feeble excuses and given to others; the invitation will be given to the Gentiles for them to come in.

This group did not like what Jesus was saying. God's chosen people not allowed into the kingdom of heaven. It's not that the door to heaven is permanently bolted shut for all Jews for ever and a day; it's still open, but others will be there, besides the Jew.

Those who were expecting to enter the kingdom because they had received advance invitations through the prophets and the law would miss out. But those who expected to be shut out because they were not good enough, or had never heard of the banquet because they were complete pagans, would be the ones to enjoy it.

Familiarity, this parable emphasizes, does indeed breed contempt, and Jesus responds that contempt is a sin that God does not lightly forgive.

What does the twist in this parable mean for you and me? Some, like Jesus' dinner guests at the Pharisee's table come from a good religious back ground.

We have been baptised or dedicated as children by believing parents. Which is a good start. Maybe we have attended Sunday School or Bible class. That's good too. We have come out to church regularly over the years and have heard all about the Christian faith many times. And as a result, we think we're Christians. But are we?

That's the question this parable puts to each one of us. We may know how to say grace before meals,

and recite the Lord's Prayer, but Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God demands more of us than just piety.

In the film, 'A Few Good Men' Tom Cruise is the young flash Navy attorney who questions the integrity and honesty of one of the officers Keffer Sutherland who is stationed at a military base.

Sutherland takes offence at the tone of the question. He claims he is a good US Marine, passed with flying colours from Westpoint. Comes from a good military back ground; and that only two books sit on his bed side table. The US Marine Code and the King James Version of the bible. Not just any copy of the bible but the King James Version.

He never said that he actually read either book. But the implication is that these books define who I am. I am a good patriot. We need to be so careful and ensure that 'Familiarity does Not breed Contempt', where we switch off, thinking I'm ok. Some may be thinking this invitation to the heavenly banquet is not for me. I have messed up my life. I'm not good enough. I put on a good front but I know inside I'm a waster. Well you are in good company with Jesus.

Heaven is made for people like you. People who know their failings, who know how they have fallen; their sin is before them. But you have to want to do something about your situation. How do we do that. Follow Jesus' guidance. He tells people young and old to 'repent and believe'. Repent means to change your sinful ways and believe in Jesus as the Son of God.

Don't feel you are excluded in any way. This story tells us clearly that there is more room in the kingdom of God for misfits and sinners. The gospel is exclusive in that no one else can save you except Jesus Christ. 'Salvation is found in no one else under heaven'.

But it's also inclusive in that Jesus turns no one away. The invitation is for everyone under heaven no matter who you are.

So why delay, 'come' he says, 'everything is ready'.

Rev Alan Wilson is a recently retired Presbyterian Minister in Northern Ireland. He was a former Police

Officer during the 'troubles' before going into the ministry. He is married to Ann and they are now proud grandparents of Jacob and Cora. He enjoys keeping Alpaccas, gardening, watching football and learning how theology relates to the environment and the world at large. He and his wife spent a summer Exchange in 2018 with a Presbyterian Church in Toronto.

The [image](#) shows, "L'Invitation au festin" (Invitation to the Feast), by Eugène Burnand, painted in 1899.

