

Luke 14:7-24

I like banquets. And, I know my wife Rie likes eating good food. Maybe that's one of the reasons why one of our favourite things to do is to find new places to eat good food. At the same time, we're quite careful to look for "good quality food at a low price," knowing we can't afford the luxury of the crazy expensive restaurants you can find in Tokyo! As a child, I remember special occasions when my dad would prepare a family banquet, decorating the table with a tablecloth, candles, and fancy dishes (normally used for guests). My three younger brothers and I would get excited for this special treatment just for us! The food wasn't fancy, but my dad would arrange vegetables in a fancy way to make it look like gourmet cooking.

Normally, our family didn't have a lot of money for eating out, and we averaged visiting a restaurant maybe twice a year. (And, that was always very exciting – even if it was just McDonalds). My parents worked hard to cook healthy meals, and we needed to learn to eat foods we didn't like. Before we could get dessert, we need to eat at least a bit of everything. This made it all the more special when we visited my aunt Agnes... She began a tradition of having a special banquet each time we visited where my brothers and I could choose anything we wanted to eat, all our favourite foods. Vegetables were not required! Since she lived far away, we only got to see her and enjoy the special banquet around once every two years. It felt like such a luxury. We could eat anything we wanted! I remember one banquet where the main meal was grapes, chocolate, bacon, ice cream, potato chips, and candy. I think we may have added in pizza as well. The feeling of having no limit was quite amazing!

This is a little like how I imagine the heavenly banquet to be. Jesus often describes heaven as a place of feasting and celebration. It will be beyond our wildest dreams, and I imagine there will be a sense of no limits to the joy experienced in heaven. We might remember loved ones who have passed away and have gone before us. They are now in God's care, but we can trust that, through God's son, Jesus Christ, there will come a day when we'll meet again at the "heavenly banquet." Through his death on the cross and his resurrection, we see that death is not the end, and we have hope for the future. God, our Creator is in control of the final outcome of history. We don't know exactly what heaven will look like, but Jesus is saying that there will be joy, celebration, and fellowship with God and people from all over the world. Like a wedding banquet celebration where there is lots of food, and those who attend are satisfied, there will also be a sense of satisfaction in heaven. All our needs will be met. Revelation 21:4 describes heaven in this way, God "will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more..."

In the book of Revelation, Jesus is described as the Lamb of God. In, chapter 19 verse 9, heaven is described as a marriage feast between Jesus (the Lamb) and the world-wide church. It says, "And the angel said to me, 'Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' And he said to me, 'These are the true words of God.'"

Wedding banquets, marriage suppers, and numerous dinner parties..., in the Bible we read how Jesus was often eating with people. He'd eat with the outcasts, the so-

called sinners and tax collectors. He'd also attend dinner parties with Pharisees, the religious leaders at the time. There is something important about sharing a meal together. We all need to eat in order to live, and special meals often mark special occasions such as birthdays and weddings. Meals also are a good opportunity for people to share together. Jesus often shared stories about banquets in order to illustrate the joy, fellowship, and celebration that comes with feasting together with others. Each month, when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we remember the last supper Jesus had with his disciples before his death, but we also anticipate the day when we'll meet again in heaven at a great feast with all those who have accepted God's grace to us given through Jesus.

In today's Bible passage, Jesus is at a meal hosted by a leader of the Pharisees. Jesus notices that some guests were choosing to sit at places of honor. He challenges them to sit instead in the lower-status spots. Then, it's possible that they may be asked to move up. The reality of the way God works is that "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Earlier, I had shared a message based on the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Jesus says the humble tax collector is the one God is happy with rather than the proud Pharisee. At the end of that story Jesus also says, "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." In heaven, the natural response to the presence of God is humility. When we are aware of God's presence, we realise that there's no way we can measure up to follow God's will perfectly. The problem is that we easily forget this. We all are affected by sin, that force that causes us to shift our focus from God and worry about ourselves. It causes us to be self-centred rather than care for all people as God loves us all. Everyone is in need of the grace of God, available to us through Jesus Christ.

In the next part of today's Bible reading Jesus tells the host,

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. But when you give a banquet invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

I think most of us would agree that humility and caring for the poor and vulnerable are good things. But, these are not easy things to accomplish as a natural part of life. We easily fall short and worry about ourselves. We compare ourselves with others, and try to look better, and do better than them. We may sometimes also ignore those who are poor or those who don't fit in well with society. The temptation is to focus more on our relationships with those who are more popular, more good-looking, more powerful, those from whom we may benefit in some way.

The final story is a continuation of the earlier stories. In the story of the great banquet, Jesus gives an example of the host inviting the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame after all the original people who'd received invitations came up with excuses to not join the banquet. One person has to go see land that he's bought, another needs to try out some oxen that he's bought, and another is busy since he's just gotten married. These are all good reasons for not going to a banquet, but one point that Jesus is making is that in terms of the heavenly banquet it's important to

live in the spirit of heaven, of focusing on God, and not letting our attention be divided with other things that may be good but are not the most important. Is striving for a deeper relationship with God a priority?

Notice that the original guests were on the wealthy side, those who could afford land and oxen, and the expenses of a wedding ceremony (which could include 7 days of feasting). After the rich refuse to come to the banquet, it's the poor, those who are not able to pay anything back who are compelled to join the banquet. When there's still room left, the servant is to search for anyone else who is around and get them to the banquet. Notice this list of people who end up at the banquet are pretty much the ones that Jesus said his host should invite – those who are not able to repay.

There are other passages where Jesus shows us God's concern for the poor and vulnerable. When Jesus begins his ministry he declares, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." (Luke 4:18). Later, when John the Baptist sends messengers to ask if Jesus if he truly is the long-awaited Saviour. Jesus replies, "Go tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them..." (Luke 7:22). These were understood to be evidence of God's presence. Where God reigns, the proud mighty ones are brought low, and those of low status are raised up. We are all equal before God.

In today's story of the banquet, Jesus is illustrating how the heavenly banquet will represent a place where all people will have equal value, starting with those who seem insignificant in this world. In the Gospel of Matthew, we can see the same story. In Matthew's version, Jesus starts by saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son...". Jesus is telling stories and giving examples to help us understand what heaven is like. They also show how God is at work right now. Wherever we see the fruits of God's Spirit, things such as love, peace, and joy, patience and kindness, we are seeing evidence of the kingdom of God already breaking into our lives. When we act with humility and treat those with low status with respect, it's God's Spirit working in us. We are then getting a taste of the future heavenly banquet, where we experience and share the love of God for all people. Let's pray.

Almighty God, thank-you for your love, shown through Jesus Christ. We confess times when we've forgotten to care for those around us and have worried too much about ourselves. May we more and more give care to those who seem insignificant by the world's standards. We thank you for your grace in inviting us to be a part of your spiritual family through Jesus. Grant us the courage to put you first, rather than look to our own interests. Help us to trust in you. Thank-you for the lives of those we remember today, those who are no longer with us. Thank-you for the promise of the heavenly banquet, that someday we'll be able to meet again, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.