

I think things have changed a bit since Biblical times. For instance, I don't have any slaves at home, the dog gets special dog food (no scraps under the table for him), and there are no crucifixions up the A30.

So should we also view this reading in a more nuanced way? After all, we've modified our attitudes to divorce, women's roles in society, banking ...

Reverend Jon lent me a couple of books to help with preparation of this talk, and Paula Gooder, an eminent theologian, definitely feels that we should read this with modern eyes. She sees this story as ambiguous. There are no exact parallels with the coming of the Kingdom. For instance, how could God have the poor and lame as the stand-by passengers, offered a seat when the main passengers didn't turn up? Surely there's an equal invitation for everyone? Maybe we should just be focusing on the main guests, and how they put their other concerns and busy-ness ahead of the Important Stuff. Jesus was after all having dinner with Pharisees, the people who reckoned that their seats were already booked in first class.

And think about how violent this king is! Paula says, 'the king/lord does *not* represent God.' We should read the story as a present-day event, and *then* think about how God feels when we don't bother to respond to him. She even thinks that Jesus exaggerates the violence and the vengeance to get a strong message across.

She is shocked by the harsh treatment of the person wearing the wrong clothes and explains that the first guests dishonour the host because they don't bother to go to the feast, the subsequent guests still need to honour the host, by dressing appropriately. She concludes that the first guests don't get to join the feast because they don't respond to Jesus the way they should.

Well, what do you think of **this** version?

An important person sends out 'save the date' messages to family, friends, colleagues, the Great and the Good. He's going to have a big party. You're invited. Then on the day, he sends out the 'ok, it's ready! Come along as soon as you like'.

But you've got an appointment to get your eyelash extensions done. Sorreee.

You're on the 10th hole with Tiger Woods. And no blobs so far!

It's the FINAL! Errm. Will it be on? Is there a big screen set up?

Sorry, business lunch with a new client. Look, this could be something big. Simply can't miss out on this opportunity.

It's a bit awkward. If you don't get this report in by the end of trading, your neck's going to be on the line.

So you just block this guy. What else can you do? He's really rather a bore. And when his people turn up, you tell them where to go, (don't open the door, just a quick mouthful on your video doorbell.)

And the big guy 'gets it'..... He has a plan.

He sends a general invite. He puts up a notice. Facebook. Instagram. Tiktok. He asks his people to go round under the railway arches and to the food banks, the women's refuges and the homes for the frail and disabled. They call in at the homeless shelters and the bus stops, the car park staircases and outside the pubs and clubs. And they bring them all back to his place. And they get a shower, and something nice to wear and they sit down at a nice table with a white tablecloth and candles and flowers. He serves them and then sits down to eat with them. And the food! 'So much and so yummy!' 'Unbelievable!' 'Can I stay here for ever?'

But one of them has pulled off the smart jacket, loosened his tie and got his phone out. 'Sorry, got to go, places to go, people to see. Actually, I don't really need all this.'

The big guy sadly takes him by the arm and shows him the door. It's dark and raining outside and cold. The door slams shut. And he weeps.

What a story! Who is this important person? This king or rich man? What is this party or wedding feast all about? And why does someone get thrown out after everyone, yes, everyone, (even the smelly ones) was invited in. UNFAIR!

Well, I'm with the second of my sources here, Douglas Hare, another eminent theologian. All sorts of people are invited to God's kingdom. Knowledgeable people who have studied the scriptures, people who have never heard of God or the Bible, people who have suffered, who are miserable, disabled in body or spirit. People who have done bad things in their lives, unspeakable cruelty, neglect, incomprehensible selfishness, fraud, violence, the proud and the unforgiving. People who never expected to be invited to anything nice, much less a new and wonderful kingdom!

Aren't the Pharisees the first guests on the guest list? The servants who go out to fetch the good and the bad from the streets, aren't they the prophets? (who had indeed been ill-treated and ignored) The people on the streets? Well, everyone else!

And the one who gets thrown out? Well, not everyone who hears God's word takes it to heart. Not everyone decides to follow Jesus. Not everyone humbly asks forgiveness – over

and over again – for the things done wrong and the harsh words uttered. What's more, if you have built not just your house but your whole city on evil, won't God send it crashing to the ground?

Who do we identify with today in this line-up?

Are we well-read but still not really accepting God's grace?

Are we willing helpers, rushing about doing things for God?

Are we part of the throng of good and bad, muddling through?

Are we relying too much on our own independence, creating our own 'spirituality'?

Every day God sends us a personal invitation to his kingdom and every day we choose whether to declare to him the mistakes we've made and ask his forgiveness.

That invitation says 'plus one'. We can choose to pop it in the kitchen drawer for another day.

Or we can take that invitation with us to whatever we're doing and share it with the people we meet there.

Fleur Pelly, 26 June 2022