

Luke 14

Verse 15-24 The Olympics are on, So I Can't Come 29.08.2004

Let us imagine for a while. Imagine Philip Ruddock, the local member and Attorney General, was preparing a banquet for all the people who come to church here at St Peter's. He has invited us all. He has spent millions on the Ingham pate, the Tasmanian scallops, exotic Kimberley Range steaks and Pavlova with North Coast tropical fruit. Well, the millions went more on the venue, the caterers, the car hires to pick us all up, the entertainment and the wine list.

When all was in readiness, he sent the stretch cars out to collect all his guests. He was there, eagerly awaiting each one of us, hoping that the party is as good as the party that will happen in Athens this coming week.

Imagine his dismay when every single stretch car returned with only the drivers. The drivers all had a similar story. One said "My passenger was sorry, but there was a Shirley Temple replay on television tonight." Another said "My passenger apologises but he had a free Big Mac coupon that he had to claim." and a third said "Mine said The Olympics are on, so I can't come!"

Imagine the annoyance flickering across the lips of Philip Ruddock. He had spent all that money and not one of us came. He thought some more and ordered the cars to drive through his electorate to invite anyone who looked like a Liberal supporter. They would drive them to his banquet.

When that happened, there was still more room, so a desperate Philip Ruddock ordered them to drive to Villawood to get the detainees and bring them to his feast.

He wanted a full party. If St Peter's folk won't come, he would fill it anyway.

That story is similar to one Jesus told at the Sabbath meal he had in Luke 14. He had already castigated the host for inviting friends, rich guests and family, who could easily repay the favour. If the host really wanted God to bless

him, then he should invite the poor, lame, blind and crippled to meals. Then his reward would come at the resurrection of the righteous.

With the awkward unease that followed, it appears someone wanted to give a more positive spin on it all. He called out "*Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.*"

This was a good Jewish hope for the Pharisees. They wanted to be in the banquet in heaven. The Sadducees denied that there was a resurrection, but the Pharisees accepted it, and thought that all good Pharisees will be there to enjoy it.

Anyone who earned that right would be blessed, they claimed. A gold medal party extraordinaire! God as the host, champions each one around the table.

But Jesus checked the laboratory results. He told this parable to disqualify the lot.

As in the story of Philip Ruddock, the excuses were trivial. The invited ones were really not interested. The excuses in the parable centred on buying land, buying five sets of oxen (normally most farmers would buy one or maybe two sets), and about being married.

Interestingly, when it comes to reasons why people do not want to respond positively to Jesus they talk about the busyness of their work, or their preoccupation with the excesses of life, or because of their relationships.

But the banquet would not be wasted. So the poor, lame, blind and crippled were invited. (Note that they are the same people that Jesus said the Pharisee should have invited to his Sabbath meal.) In the parable that was not enough. Servants had to go out and compel people to come in.

Then the man hosting the banquet in Jesus' story declared that those who were invited will not be welcome now. They will not even be able to eat any left-overs or have a doggy bag.

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Instead of jostling for better seating arrangements and being proud of having a seat in God's banquet, Jesus declared that these people would miss out. They claimed to be ready to accept God's invitation, but they refused to come.

Jesus was right there among them, but the Pharisees were content in trying to trap him and discredit him, then chuckle and grin about their own good standing.

Those people they despised, the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame were being invited in. They were coming in ahead of the religious experts, and the experts were rejecting God. Their places were being given to others, even if they had to be compelled to come.

Compelling them cannot justify the use of force or crusades and the like, to make people become Christians. Rather it shows the attitude that even those who are forced to come in will be more welcome than those originally invited.

So does that mean that we must reject every Jew?

No, that is a false conclusion, because many Jews, including many of the Pharisees were accepted into God's kingdom on and after the day of Pentecost. Also, who were the lame, crippled, poor and blind if not Jews.

But God does take his invitation to people to join with Him very seriously.

The invitation to join with Jesus in the banquet of heaven still stands. I hope each one of us has accepted, and is not toying around with it. If you have not accepted, what is stopping you? Is it worth it? The reasons for not accepting Philip Ruddock's mythical banquet invitations seemed futile. The reasons for not accepting the invites in Jesus' story also seemed futile. How about any that we might have? Are they futile too?

Jesus is encouraging us to accept his invitation, and like the servants in the story, to bring others to fill God's banquet. Let us fill it.