



THE BIG BASH

A few years back I read an article on TIME magazine's website about an Aussie girl called Jess, who sent out an invite to her 16th birthday party to all her friends on Facebook. The only problem was: she forgot to adjust the privacy setting on her Facebook page, so the invite went out ... to the whole planet! Friends started to invite other friends, and within 24 hours over 200,000 people had accepted the invitation. When her parents found out they cancelled the party, the police were called ... and poor Jess ended up having a quiet night in (which just goes to show: you need to be careful what you put on the internet).

In today's parable, Jesus talks about another party that everyone gets invited to, only this time ... it's no accident!

Luke 14:15-24

If you could invite 3 famous people round for dinner, as your fantasy dinner-guests, who would you choose?

Israelites believed that at the end of time God, through His Messiah, would establish His Kingdom, and it was often pictured as a huge feast. The idea started way back in the OT, e.g. Isaiah 25:6-8.

Who's invited? Everyone is!

But as time went on, scribes began to 'doctor' the prophecy, and removed certain groups from the guest-list. E.g. the *Isaiah Targum* (an amplified

version of Isaiah) says that any Gentiles who turn up will be instantly wiped out by a plague (nice!). Later on, the Qumran community in their *Messianic Rule* scroll added a clause that says anyone with a disability or obvious physical condition wouldn't be there, either (inclusivity clearly wasn't a concept back then).

I.e. the only people expecting to sit around that table were the 'privileged few.' Which is why, when Jesus is enjoying a meal with a group of Pharisees, one of them announces, "Blessed is the man who manages to make it to the feast in the Kingdom of God!"

Everyone expects Jesus to say "Amen."

But He doesn't.

Instead, He tells a story in which it all gets turned upside-down and back-to-front. In this story, a nobleman decides to throw a party – perhaps a birthday party, who knows? But he sends out the invitations, the big day arrives, there's all this amazing food, and ... no-one shows.

What would you do? If you're anything like me, you'd start texting: "Where are you? Are you coming?!!! :(." In the same way, the nobleman sends his servant to find out what's going on. Take a look at the responses:

"I've just bought a field: I've got to check it out."

"I've just bought 5 yoke of oxen: I've got to check them out."

"I've just got hitched: I've got to check her out!"

Now in biblical times no one would buy a field, a precious acquisition in the developing world, without seeing it first. No one would buy a yoke of oxen without testing the animals to make sure they work well together. And no one would suddenly get married at a moment's notice (a wedding could take a whole year to plan). Basically, these excuses were a slap in the face – a huge insult.

Hence why the nobleman blows his stack!

So what happens next? In the very heart of the story, the birthday boy changes the setting on his Facebook page ... and invites the *whole* planet! He sends his servant to bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. And then he sends him further – into the pagan world.

But what does this tell us about the Kingdom of God? And what does it tell us about us?

1) Everyone Has To Be Invited. The nobleman's servant looks at the empty places and thinks, "I've got to fill this!"

And that's what we are called to, as well. Now you might be thinking, "But that's not my ministry, Steve. I don't have the gift of evangelism." But when Jesus gave the Great Commission in Matthew 28 – to go and make disciples of all nations – He wasn't just talking to the Apostles. He was talking to *all* of His followers – to *all* of us. Which means that, if you're a follower of Jesus, this is your responsibility, too. To be here yourself. And to invite others too.

And the invite has to go to everyone. If you look at the Gospels, you get the impression Jesus liked eating with people. But more often than not, it's with the marginalised and the messed-up – the outsiders. In contrast, the people *we* tend to hang out with are usually a bit like us: nice, safe, uncomplicated (supposedly) ... and Christian! And that includes the people we invite to church (why do you think we see so much transfer growth in this town?!).

But Jesus wants to send us further – into an unbelieving world that desperately needs Him. So, who are *you* inviting?

2) Everyone Has To Accept. When Jesus told this story, it was a message to the Pharisees seated around Him. "You think you're going to be there on that day, but you're not. You're going to reject the invite." And they did.

In the Middle East, even today, eating a meal with others is a sign of friendship and acceptance. So, this story is Jesus' way of saying, "I want to be your friend" (how amazing is *that?*). Regardless of fame, importance, popularity, 'likes' on Facebook or Instagram, Jesus invites us. Not because He needs us, but because He loves us.

But friendship is a 2-way thing. As with any social event, we have to accept the invite. I am not a universalist, as in, I don't believe all roads lead to God, or that everyone automatically goes to heaven. We have to say 'yes' to Jesus, to the love and joy and peace and hope that only He can bring. We have to *choose* to be friends with Him.

If we choose not to, that's up to us – Jesus respects our freewill-decisions, even if He doesn't agree with them! But if we want to be there, we have to accept it, mean it, and act on it. So, have *you* accepted the invite?

The Moral Of The Story ...

All of which brings us back to our fantasy dinner-guests. Why did you choose the people or the characters you did? Because they're popular? Because they're important? Because they're fascinating? Because all your other friends would go 'wow!?' Maybe it's a mixture. But the main reason, I would guess, is that you'd hope to become friends with them.

Jesus wants the same – for all of us. And that's the moral of the story. Which is why, on the church notice-board, on the website, on all our publicity, there's this strap-line:

Where Everyone Belongs.

Because everyone does.

But, as this parable makes clear, everyone has to be invited. And everyone has to accept.

So, are you up for it?