

Sermon

West Kirk & Polbeth Harwood

By: Rev Dr Jonanda Groenewald

Text: Luke 14:15-24

Andre and I had the privilege to attend the Queen's Garden Party at the Palace of Holyroodhouse on Tuesday.

It was Andre who was invited – I was just his (very happy) partner! But let me just bring you into the picture quickly: Ever since I can remember, Andre's been fascinated by royalty from all over the world. Without knowing this, our local counsellor nominated Andre to go to the party because of all the work he does in the community. So when this invitation fell through our letterbox, I almost had to scrape Andre off the ceiling! He was so excited! Andre is at his happiest when he can enjoy a cuppa with special friends, especially if the tea is served in fine china!!

So there was never a question about us attending, Andre counted the sleeps. But of course, because the queen was going to be there, strict protocol was followed. Women had to wear a day dress and hat, and men a morning coat or uniform. We read and reread the invitation and made sure that we knew exactly when to be where and what to do once we get there.

So driving into Edinburgh, Andre remarked that the people in the car behind us were going to the Garden Party too. And I said: How do you

know that? To which he replied that they were smartly dressed, but also had the parking permit in their window. At which point we realised that we forgot our own parking permit at the house. If we were to turn around we wouldn't be able to arrive in time, so we decided to just take the chance – we had the invitation with us after all.

Since there were about 8000 people invited to the Garden Party, I'm sure you can imagine what the traffic was like. And then, when we were walking distance from the Palace, a policeman stopped us and asked for the permit. No entry without it. Not even my nicest smile and the collar around Andre's neck could convince him to let us in... (Which I suspected was going to happen.) So we had to turn around and find a parking space somewhere in the heavily congested city centre and then walk to the palace!

Oh – did I mention it was Andre who forgot the permit, after I asked if he had everything?! So we had quite a distance to walk – in heels, on cobblestones, might I add?! But we decided to just make the best of our situation and enjoy the day.

And what a beautiful day it was! The sun was shining all day long, the tea, cucumber sandwiches and dainty cakes were nicer than we expected and to see the queen was just amazing.

And every single person there was dressed correctly, behaved properly and felt privileged for the opportunity to be there.

I don't think that anybody who were able to attend would refuse such an invitation, and nobody would even consider not to follow the protocol –

because that's just what you do if the Queen (or Lord Chamberlain) invites you over.

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In the parable we read earlier, the people who were invited had a completely different attitude.

The host was most definitely someone important, because not just anybody could host a grand banquet in those days. And the people he invited would be special too – but by the looks of it they didn't realize what a great honour it was to be invited to this banquet.

Because they all had rather lame excuses. One bought a field and wanted to go see it, another bought 5 yoke of oxen and wanted to go try them out and yet another's excuse was that he had just gotten married.

That was the typical reaction of people in the 1st century world, who didn't want to attend something, because they thought that they were better than the host.

The first 2 persons referred to were definitely wealthy landowners, because if you were able to buy land, or owned oxen to plough your fields, it meant that you were part of a very very small number of people who had money, since most people in the 1st century Mediterranean world were poor. If you had lots of money and owned land, though, you would have had people working for you too – so neither of these excuses was valid reasons for not attending the banquet. And in that culture that would be like a slap through the host's face.

The 3rd person recently got married. You were excused from going to war in your first year of marriage, but not from attending social functions you most probably already RSVPd for. So once again his reaction was a grievous insult to the host.

But then the host did something that was unheard of in Biblical times – he invited the poor, crippled, blind and lame from the streets and alleys of his town. These people would never have been to a fancy banquet before, because of their social status, and by inviting them the host committed ‘social suicide’, but he just thought that he has gone through all this trouble to prepare a special feast, so a special feast he will have. If the people he invited didn’t want to join him, he’ll get others. Anybody *willing to attend* his banquet would be welcome there.

And those who were invited and *didn’t want* to go – well... They weren’t welcome anymore.

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The meaning of this parable is clear.

The kingdom of God was very often portrayed as a banquet, feast or meal of some kind in those days, because meals were seen as ceremonies during which people’s social status were confirmed.

So – God invited people to be a part of his kingdom, but the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the time, declined, without good reason. They were too busy with their own lives and the things they regarded as important in their own eyes. Things that, in the bigger scheme of things, weren’t that important at all.

But when they declined God opened up his kingdom to all – no matter who they were. Something so gracious and big that it would have made people do a double take when they realised what it meant.

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To this very day God still invites us to him. In Jesus he gave us an open invitation to become members of his family.

And keeping the parable in mind, we should accept straight away without any hesitation – because no matter how important the things we are busy with are, nothing is more important than saying yes to God.

And I know that you might now be thinking that I'm preaching to the choir, so to speak, because the fact that you are in church this morning is a sign that you have accepted this invitation. And that is wonderful, but we need to remember that this invitation is extended to every single aspect of our lives.

We can't be members of the family of God on Sunday mornings, but the rest of the week our lives portray nothing of it.

Like my hat was a sure sign to everybody who saw me on Tuesday that I was on my way to the Queen's Garden Party, just like that our lives, everything we say and do, should be a sign to the people around us that we accepted the invitation from God. At all times, we should be "wearing" our Christianity with pride.

Nobody would even consider ignoring an invitation from the Queen, and nobody who accepted such an invitation would even consider not

following the correct protocol. And in the bigger scheme of things – these are only worldly things.

An invitation from God is on a whole different level. We *can't* say no to God, we can't pretend that we don't know about the invitation, or that the things we are busy with are more important.

At the Garden Party – if you didn't have the correct forms of identification and you weren't dressed appropriately, you wouldn't be allowed to enter the palace gates.

God, on the other hand, *knows* us, we don't have to prove to him who we are, we don't have to wear or do anything special, and he accepts us just the way we are. Even if we forget our parking permits at home, we'll be allowed to park in palace grounds!

All God wants from us is a yes, thank you. And if we mean this “yes”, it will show.

I feel really special that God invited me, I hope you do too! Let's RSVP with a life of thanksgiving and love.

Amen