

Hospitality of the Kingdom

Psalm 146; Luke 14:12–24; Hebrews 13:1–3

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It's wonderful to be back with you this morning and to have the privilege of opening God's Word together.

Last weekend my family and I enjoyed a couple of days away in Murray Bridge. We had a restful and enjoyable time together and spent some time beside the Murray River trying to catch fish. Unfortunately, we weren't successful. But while we were there, we were greeted by a very friendly pelican. It came remarkably close to us, no doubt hoping for a share of our food.



It was a magnificent bird, and I managed to take a photograph of it. Here it is – isn't it beautiful?

On Sunday morning we attended the worship service at a local church just around the corner from where we were staying. It was a blessing to worship there. As a minister I am usually leading the service or preaching, so it was refreshing simply to sit in the congregation, join in the signing and listen to the sermon.

As much as we enjoyed our time away, it is good to be home, and I have been looking forward to worshipping with you again today.

This morning we continue our sermon series 'A Church for Others.' Over the past two weeks we have reflected on what it means to be sent as Christ was sent and to be salt and light in the world. Today we come to our third message, 'Hospitality of the Kingdom.' At the heart of today's message is this simple but profound truth: God has graciously welcomed us into his kingdom; therefore, as his people, we are called to welcome others in his name.

Our Scripture readings today – Luke 14 and Hebrews 13 – speak powerfully about hospitality. Let us begin with our Gospel reading from Luke. One of the distinctive features of Luke's Gospel is its emphasis on the compassion of Jesus for those who were often overlooked by society. Again and again Luke shows us Jesus reaching out to the poor, the sick, the outcasts, the disabled, the tax collectors, the 'sinners', and others who were treated as insignificant or unworthy. This does not mean that Jesus ignored the rich

or the influential. It only shows that he welcomed all who came to him in humble faith. He looked beyond social standing and saw their hearts.

That emphasis prepares us for the parable we have read this morning. The setting is important. Jesus is attending a banquet, and after teaching about humility and generosity, one of the guests says, 'Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God' (v. 15). It's a wonderful statement. Who would not want to share in God's kingdom.

Jesus responds by telling a parable. He speaks of a man who prepares a great banquet and invites many guests. This is no ordinary meal. It is a lavish celebration, carefully prepared and generously provided. Everything is ready. The invitations have gone out. The only thing left is for the guests to come.

But then comes the great surprise. One after another, those who had been invited begin making excuses. One has bought a field. Another has purchased five yoke of oxen. Another has just been married. None of these reasons is necessarily wrong in itself. Fields, work and family are all good gifts from God. The problem is that each person places something else ahead of the invitation. They value other things more than the generous invitation they have received.

Sadly, that is still true today. Many people hear God's invitation to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, yet they decline it - not always because they openly reject God, but because other things become more important. Careers, possessions, ambitions, comfort or simply the busyness of life crowd out the call of God. The tragedy is not merely that they refuse an invitation to a banquet. They refuse the invitation into God's kingdom.

Yet the story does not end there. The master refuses to let his banquet hall remain empty. So he tells his servant: 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.' And when there is still room, he sends out the servant again: 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full.' What a beautiful picture of the grace of God! Those who expected to be included refuse to come, while those who never imagined they would be invited are welcomed with open arms.

Friends this is the heart of the gospel. God delights in welcoming those who know they have nothing to offer him. He welcomes sinners who come in repentance and faith. He welcomes those who recognise their need of his grace.

The great question, then, is not whether God's invitation has been given. It has. The question is whether we have accepted it. Have you responded to Christ's invitation? Have you entrusted your life to him? Have you received the forgiveness and eternal life he freely offers? If not, I encourage you not to delay. God's invitation still stands. And if you have responded to that invitation, then rejoice. You have been welcomed into God's kingdom - not because you deserved it, but because of the grace of God shown to us through Jesus Christ.

That brings us naturally to our second reading. If God has welcomed us so generously, then surely his people should become a people who gladly welcome others. If Luke 14 shows us the generous hospitality of God, Hebrews 13 shows us the kind of hospitality that should characterise God's people.

The chapter opens with these words: 'Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters.' Those words remind us that the Christian life is never merely about believing certain truths. It is about living them out in our relationships with one another.

The original readers of Hebrews understood this very well. They were believers who had endured suffering because of their faith in Christ. They had been publicly mocked and persecuted. Others had stood alongside fellow believers who were imprisoned. Some had even lost their priority because they refused to abandon Christ. It is to this suffering and persecuted church that the writer says, 'Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters.'

In difficult times, it's easy to become discouraged and inward-looking. Instead, they were to continue loving, encouraging and caring for one another as members of God's family. The writer then immediately adds: 'Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.'

At first glance, that may seem like a completely new subject. But it is not. Hospitality is simply one of the most practical expressions of Christian love. When we welcome people, care for them, share a meal with them, provide practical help, or open our homes, we are putting Christian love into action.

The reference to entertaining angels almost certainly points back to the stories of Abraham and Lot in Genesis 18 and 19. Both welcomed strangers without realising that God had sent his heavenly messengers. The writer is not suggesting that every stranger we meet might literally be an angel. Rather he reminds us that acts of hospitality may have a far greater significance than we realise. God often works through the ordinary acts of kindness his people show to others.

Of course, we live in a very different world from Abraham or the first-century church. In those days there were very few inns, and nothing comparable to the hotels we have today. As a result, travellers, missionaries, and Christians displaced by persecution often depended upon the hospitality of fellow believers for food, lodging and care.

Today we also need to exercise wisdom. Showing hospitality does not mean placing ourselves or our families in unnecessary danger. We teach our children to be careful around strangers, and there are situations where caution is entirely appropriate.

But the biblical command remains just as relevant. Hospitality today may take different forms. It may mean inviting someone who is new to church to share a meal after the service. It may mean delivering meals to someone who is unwell, visiting a person who is lonely, supporting missionaries, or caring for believers who are suffering because of their

faith. Hospitality is much bigger than opening the front door of our homes. It is opening our hearts, our lives, our time and our resources to others for the sake of Christ.

The writer continues in verse 3: 'Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.' Once again this is simply another expression of Christian love. We are not to forget those who suffer. We are to identify with them, pray for them, care for them, and, where possible, support them in practical ways.

When we step back and look at these verses together, we can see the beautiful pattern:

Keep loving one another.

Show hospitality.

Remember those who suffer.

These are not three unrelated commands. They are three expressions of the same Christ-like love - a love that reflects the generous welcome we ourselves have received from God.

Now as I conclude this message, let me leave you with three simple encouragements.

First, if you have never responded to God's invitation, do not delay. The invitation to the great banquet still stands. Through the Lord Jesus Christ, God offers the forgiveness of sins, the gift of eternal life and a place in his kingdom. That invitation is extended freely because of God's grace. If you have never entrusted your life to Christ, I encourage you to do so today. Do not make the mistake of those in Jesus' parable who allowed other things to become more important than the invitation of God.

Second, if you belong to Christ, remember that you have been wonderfully welcomed by God. Sometimes we think of hospitality merely as good manners or friendliness. But Christian hospitality begins much deeper than that. It begins with the gospel.

Every one of us who belongs to Christ was once far from God. We were strangers to his covenant, separated from him because of our sin. Yet, in his great mercy, God has welcomed us into his family through the death and resurrection of his Son. We have been forgiven. We have been adopted. We have been given a place at his table. When we truly grasp that, hospitality is no longer a duty; it becomes a joyful response to the grace we ourselves have received.

Third, let us ask God to make our church a church that reflects his generous welcome. One of the encouraging things I hear again and again from visitors is that our church is a warm and welcoming church. I thank God for that, and I thank you for the part each of you plays in making people feel at home among us.

But there is room to grow. Every Sunday we have opportunities to welcome someone we don't know, to speak with someone who is sitting on their own, to encourage a newcomer, to invite someone for a cup of tea or a meal, to visit someone who is unable

to attend, to care for those who are lonely, and to support those who are going through difficult times. Hospitality is the calling of the whole church.

Imagine what our church would look like if every one of us prayed each week, 'Lord, show me one person I can welcome, encourage, or care today?' I believe that if each of us made that our prayer, God would be pleased to use our church to touch many lives. People may not remember every sermon they hear. They may not remember every song we sing. But they will remember how they were welcomed. They will remember whether they experienced the love of Christ among his people.

May the Lord give us hearts that are open, homes that are generous, hands that are ready to serve and lives that bear witness to the gracious hospitality of his kingdom.

Amen.