

God's Great Banquet:

Insights into hospitality from Isaiah 25.6-9, and its cousin story in Luke 14.15-24.

Personal introduction: Good morning to everyone. Its good to see some already familiar faces, but if you are wondering who the heck is this guy upfront, my name is Waldir and I am married to Fernanda. I trained in theology and have have various parish and non-parish based jobs over the last 15 years, including some secular jobs. Until mid July I was leading a small combined rural parish in Lumsden, Balfour and Kingston.

My wife Fernanda who had been working towards Registration with The NZMC, was offered her first house surgeon position at Dunedin Hospital. For a couple of months I came up on my days off and she went down on hers, until finally we moved up definitely on the third week of July.

Deep Freeze Story - God brought us to Dunedin via the deep-freeze of Southland... Whether Dunedin is going to live up to the warmth levels of the dining hall, that is still rather debatable!

Introduce the Theme: Early on in my time in Southland I came across some statistics that perplexed and saddened me,

90% of new immigrants to New Zealand (5 years of arriving) have never set foot in a kiwi home.

And to a degree this talk is the result of my own searching... of trying to go back to the Bible and make sense of it all somehow.

Over the last I have repeatedly asked people (namely kiwis) why? and there are a variety of explanations, most revolving around fear of the unknown, unsure about what to serve, concern with language barriers, and so on.

But while at one level these explanations are legitimate, everyday in New Zealand public services are extended across languages and cultures, millions worth of business transactions take place every day, Restaurants dish-up meals to people who have often never tried that type of food before and couldn't pronounce the name of the dish and simply point to it on the menu.

So instead of asking 'why are people doing this?', perhaps a more fruitful question would be to ask "Why is hospitality so important to God?" and why is it so meaningful for Christians?

PRAYER

house sitting story

Now I'm really thankful for the life I've lived so far, God has gifted me with many unique opportunities which I have endeavoured to pursue with as little waste as possible. But one thing I haven't had very many of in my life is: paid jobs. And one of these things I did not for money, but for accommodation was house sitting.

If you have done any house sitting you know there comes a moment when the owner of the house wants to either talk directly, or probe you on your partying habits? There are different tones and cadences and nuances in the way home owners approach this:

- 'When you have your friends over, be careful with the carpet, wine stains, etc...
- Listen we would prefer if you refrained from entertaining in our home...
- Will you be having any gatherings that I should be aware of?
- Do you drink red wine?
- What sort of music do you like? at what volume?

We seem to have this natural instinctive tendency to protect and want to regulate our own homes. And most homeowners here today would probably say 'well, naturally - it's my home'.

But the funny thing is that God doesn't seem to be going 'Erm... just go easy on the parties. Watch out for red wine on the carpets... just take it easy'...

If this picture of Isaiah is anything to go by, if it is indeed a portrayal of church in heaven that we so often pray 'on earth as it is in heaven' then what he is actually saying is 'by all means... I expect you to throw parties'.

Now that's a bit radical for Sunday morning. You'd expect this sort of stuff to come up at a home group, or a prayer meeting at someone's home.

'did you know that the Bible tells us to throw parties!? no way! yes.

But here we are, and this is Gods Word: 'On this Mountain...'

I. The Venue [MOUNTAIN]

'On this mountain' - what an unusual venue for a Banquet. That's what I thought when I was reflecting on this passage a while back. I mean people are becoming more and more creative with their venues. There are street parties (vogel St.), boat parties (hire a party boat in queenstown), there are definitely woodshed parties... but mountain parties were somewhat foreign to me. UNTIL I went to see the new Everest film - about before they set off from base camp they have a party, nearly 18000' high!

Now for us to begin to grasp how meaningful this piece of information is, we need to appreciate the symbolism of mountains in Scripture.

So I took a quasi-scientific approach to this and did what has become almost second nature to this generation: I googled it. A word-search for 'mountain' within the entire Biblical text and began searching for these symbolisms. It wasn't long before a pattern started to emerge:

Isaiah calls it the 'Mountain of the Lord' chapter 2...

[ARARAT] After the world had endured 40 days and nights of tempestuous deluge, and as the waters receded, the Ark came to rest on a **Mountain**, and on that **Mountain** new life began in a freshly washed world. On that **Mountain** Noah built an Altar and on that **Mountain** he received a promise - a rainbow. (view from the top)

[SINAI] On a **Mountain**... Moses went up to meet with God, and on that **Mountain** there was a bush that burned but was not consumed; and on a **Mountain** God gave him the 10 commandments.

[MORIAH] Abraham and his son Isaac, once took a journey of some days and hiked up a **Mountain** together, and on that **Mountain** the Lord provided a lamb.

[BEATITUDES] On a **Mountain** Jesus delivered a sermon that spoke of a different world, the world of his father. A place where the poor were better off, where the persecuted were blessed, where the broken hearted were actually closer to happiness...

[HERMON] On a **Mountain**, the deity of Jesus became so evident that his face began to shine, and on that **Mountain** Elijah and Moses appear to be talking with Jesus. Peter, James and his brother John were so confused (may be they were low on oxygen) that they suggested they build their own version of base-camp up there, because the presence of God was being so strongly

felt up there that they thought we might as well live here on the top of this **mountain** with our GOD.

[GOLGOTHA] On the top of a hill our Lord Jesus was crucified,

[MOUNT OF OLIVES] and from the top of a **mountain** he ascended into heaven to be with the father.

I've just taken you on a virtual tour of mount: Ararat, Moriah, Sinai, Carmel, Mt. of Beatitudes, Mt Hermon, Mt. Calvary, and Mt. of Olives.

But if you think that I am somehow trying to turn you into a mountaineer... you couldn't be farther from the truth.

Ok... enough of Mountains. Type in the word 'house' and you might be surprised to find out some of the most significant events of the Christianity happened at houses.

The Venue [HOUSE]

Jesus made a point to be found eating and drinking at corrupt rich man's **home**.

The Apostle Paul when falls of his horse and goes blind is led by the hand to someone's home - receive the Christian hospitality he to vehemently rejected until then.

The Last supper was prepared and served in someone's **home**.

In the **home** of Jairus, a leader in the Jewish Synagogue, Jesus tells a dead young girl to get up and she springs back to life in front of everyone.

The Pentecost happened at some one's **home**.

One day Mary, heavily pregnant with Jesus went to visit Elizabeth at her **home**, and baby-JB senses the presence of Baby Messiah and leaps inside her womb.

What I am trying to do it to highlight that God is offering his hospitality in His home. The Great Banquet of Luke 14 also takes place at the Host's home.

And as I do so I am asking the help of the Holy Spirit to come and help us renew our mind and shift the focus and the locus of hospitality away from the church building towards the home. Folks the Tabernacle was a temporary fixture.

Before you invite someone to church next time, consider inviting them to your home. And extending God's hospitality to them there.

On that Mountain, the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich foods...

II. The Host

Folks we tend to forget that this is God's world. Yes we've been entrusted with its care, but it is God's world.

He is the ultimate Host, he is the Lord of Hosts.

Go back to the house sitting example.

Lets say you have left someone housesitting your home. And wherever you are on your holiday (somewhere sunny and warm, whiz white sandy beaches and cold piña coladas) you are walking along the riviera and you come across a poster, glued onto a bus stop sign. And it says:

Mega-party on (Address/date/time)- free beer and barbecue!

All invited - bring friends.

Hosted by 'the name of your house sitter' (date, supplies)

Now if you are anything like me, that would make you furious. And there lies the problem:

But God in his infinite generosity seems to take it a step further - and say yes! God ahead and host this party! and here are the supplies.

Now you may think this is a bit far fetched, but this is exactly how we act. God has entrusted us with everything - and yet we walk around pretending it is ours to keep, not to care for.

The practical aspects of life can lead us to think that way. If you pick-up your car registration - it doesn't say 'owner - God'; if you pick-up the deeds to your property, it doesn't say 'proprietor - God' sometimes it may say 'The Bank' but not God.

So we walk around thinking we're hot stuff, because we 'have' a nice car, or a boat, or a holiday home, or a nice house... and in doing so we neglect the role and place of the Host, and ignore the old roman saying that 'shrouds have no pockets'.

On this Mountain - the Venue (the home)
The Lord Almighty - The Host
Will prepare a feast of rich foods - The Menu

III.The Menu

Now I wont spend a lot of time on the menu.

Just a word of encouragement for vegetarians and T-Totalers: I personally don't believe 'Best Meets and Red wine' is all that is going to be served at this feast - although as an average South-American, I am inclined to want to believe that...

We all know that some of the best tasting foods are not exactly good for us, specially in excess. Red meat and Wine included. However, this particular party takes place in Heaven. Where there is neither illness nor lack of self control.

I think Isaiah was simply implying - the best of foods.
God is not giving us a shopping list, he is saying give your best like I did.

Because when the time, God reached into the very bosom of his own triune existence to provide the perfect lamb - the final passover meal.

When the God's people were fleeing Egypt, the blood of the Lamb was smeared on the doors of the **Homes**

We may be organising the hospitality on Earth, but there is still only one Host of hosts.

When it comes to catering, do your best, at home.

VENUE-HOST-MENU - AND NOW THE GUESTS

IV. The Guests

Invitation to surprise party - story (3 bits of info on invite)

An important bit of information on this invitation is that it has my name and my wife's. If any of you (unless you have one of these) turn up at the venue on the day, you are likely to be barred at the door.

You see, that is not the case in Isaiah - or Luke 14 - God's invitation of love is systematically (Luke) categorically (Isaiah¹) extended to all.

Should you accept this invitation, there is no way you would be turned back at the door.

'On this Mountain, the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food - for all peoples'

Dairy vs Sheep & Beef

One aspect that compounded the 90% statistic was that almost as soon as I arrived in Southland I noticed this rift straight right through the middle of communities - churches included.

Not only were they less likely to be invited for being foreigners, now they are sitting on the other side of this fault line. On one side a predominantly sheep & Beef oriented church and on the other, the dairy world and its international workforce.

By predominantly I mean: composition of membership, eldership, managers/deacons; from worship times to governance to church-related social activities... Parish life was geared to suit Sheep & Beef farmers.

¹ It is important to be reminded of how radical the inclusion of 'all peoples' was in that context of Isaiah. Only a few verses earlier he was talking about 'silencing the uproar of the foreigner'. Sometimes we are tempted to think that this radical message is a NT one, but here is Isaiah in the middle of the OT saying that not **only** the Israelites would be dining at the Messianic Feast.

So for two years I got to learn the life of a sheep & beef farmer. I did lambing beats, I fed pet lambs, I did shearing, tailing and crutching, and I grew to understand the way they saw the world, life, church, etc..

But 2 years into my ministry I had met some people in the dairy community, one or two families had started attending our church, but still something was missing. So to the bewilderment of my Elders I brought forward the suggestion that I seek training as an AI technician so I could enter their world as one of them.

If you are wondering what AI means... in this context it has nothing to do with Artificial Intelligence - it means artificial insemination of dairy cows.

THUMBS UP FOR DAIRY

Now it would be an understatement to tell you that I had no idea of what I was getting myself into. Literally. I can tell you now that I have tasted milk straight from the VAT, and I have tasted cow poo straight from the (you know where), and unfortunately -unlike yourselves- the cow poo I tasted had not been diluted in milk.

No Waldir! there is no possible presence of faecal coliforms in my milk! I get it from the milk man! - keep telling yourself that:)

BACK TO: **THE GUESTS** slide

But other than these changes in my diet that I just mentioned, this job gave me insight into the world of migrant workers in Northern Southland.

I took leave to do it and, after the initial impact, the church was supportive and accommodating. This job gave me a unique opportunity to visit about 13 different dairy farms every day for 42 days (all within the parish district) and meet their workers in their element.

The people I met, the conversations I had, the meals I shared, and the insights I have drawn from this experience have made me a richer person.

But why is this important enough to make a softened parish-based theologian be willing to get his hands dirty in project like this? because they are guests 'all peoples'; 'go to the streets and invite everyone'.

Because one day God in his infinite love and wisdom decided to extend his hospitality to us through the life and sacrifice of his son Jesus, so that you and I, and 'them' (in accepting this invitation) would no longer need to be called 'you and I and them', but be called brothers and sisters in Christ.

They are guests. Last week we heard about orphans and how provisions for the care and protection of them were enshrined in Scripture. May I remind you that when the bible talks about these vulnerable groups, more often than not, they are composed of: Orphans, Widows and Foreigners/Strangers.

Perhaps we can pick out the orphans more easily, maybe they are left in a hospital in Romania, or they are in care or in foster homes, they are adopted; perhaps we can identify the widows - live on their own, visit the cemetery often; But in a land of immigrants, who the heck is the Foreigner?

Let's take a one minute break and think about this question - talk. We are more than half way through. Thanks for listening.

VENUE-HOST-MENU-GUESTS-

V. The Message

'On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death for ever.'

Folks the message of God's great banquet is unapologetically messianic. It speaks forth of the death of death in the death of Christ.

That's a powerful message.

Nonchalant attitude towards death in some circles. This absurd view that somehow death is something natural.

LION KING

If you recall a conversation between the young lion king and his father at the beginning of the story, where the young lion is perplexed. His father just told him that there is a delicate balance that needs to be maintained and that every living creature in Pridelands is important from the small ants to the antelopes... and then the Lion King turns to his father and says:

But dad, don't we eat antelopes?

It's the Circle of Life
And it moves us all
Through despair and hope
Through faith and love
Till we find our place
On the path unwinding
In the Circle
The Circle of Life

Can you sense the utter hopelessness of these lyrics? a path that unwinds in a circle where you die and become grass and someone else eats you and so on and so on...

This is for just as encouraging as a spiral dive of a plane that has lost all engines and its control surfaces.

BACK TO: **THE MESSAGE** slide

Often the best questions about death come from children, and I have to say, the 'circle of life' answer is often the easiest. But is it true?

'Rakuna matata!' the swahili expression that could have been kiwi: 'no worries'. We live, we die, that is the circle of life.

And we grow to believe that, and all of a sudden everything that Jesus did: his supernatural birth, his sinless life, his perfect death and resurrection... all become futile because death is a normal part of life. And normal parts of life need not be defeated.

Lets say you had this terminal illness and as you are trying to come to terms with this reality, the medical team that is taking care of you walks in.

They've all got this look of exclamation in their faces, it's a mixture of joy and surprise, with a hint of disbelief. There's a pause there and finally one begins to tell you: there is a new treatment that has been discovered that completely cures your condition, it leaves no side effects and is subsidised in NZ.

No worries Doc. I'll pass on that one. I believe in the circle of life.

Rakuna matata - Rubbish.

Death is not natural, it's not normal, it was introduced to this world and it is in the process of being eradicated by one single and exclusive measure.

Let me share some words with you from a guy called Daniel Groody, he writes among a few things, about migration from a theological perspective:

'The basic premise of a theology of migration is that God, in Jesus, so loved the world that he migrated into the far and distant country of our broken human existence and laid down his life on a cross so that we could be reconciled to him and migrate back to our homeland with God and enjoy renewed fellowship at all levels of our relationships. Reading the Christian tradition from a migrant perspective involves perceiving what God is doing in the world through Jesus Christ and understanding God's desire to cross over the various barriers that divide and alienate our relationships'

Knowing this message is one thing. Communicating it is another

Let me share a story with you that may be will encourage and perhaps act as a warning to you.

Background: mexicans and kiwis (navigators)

Abdul (a Syrian refugee) approached my friend at an 'English Language Café', that they run in Izmir Turkey and said he wanted to know more about Christianity. For 2 years they met every single week.

Towards the end of the 2 years Abdul started asking more direct questions and share some of his. My friend who at that stage had given Abdul a copy of the New Testament in Arabic at his request, was always cautious and would answer most questions along the lines 'continue to read and to ask questions... one day the answer will become apparent'.

** this is my friend telling me, a couple of months ago when he came to NZ to for a visit] - at this stage I have got goose bumps all over my body, tears running down my face.

One day Abdul broke down, and told my friend about this recurring dream he had been having for a while. This was the dream: Abdul was on one side of a cliff and my friend on the other. Abdul wanted to cross over to be where my friend was but he couldn't, there was this large abyss between them and it was impossible to pass. Then - and this is Abdul telling my friend - he said 'there was a bridge that came down and laid across the gap and made a

path for me'. Then Mr. Abdul Wahabi looks my friend in the eyes and asks: what is that Bridge?

You know what my friend told him? Ask the bridge.²

God's timing is more often than not different than our timing. So when you are sharing God's message in the context of hospitality, ask God for wisdom, sensitivity, tactfulness and discernment.

God's hospitality starts at our home, we may call it our house but he is the Host.

Dish up something good to the best of your abilities, resources and knowledge.

Remember all should be welcome, particularly the vulnerable.

The message of God's hospitality is that death has been defeated. In other words, that there is more to life than living, and that there is hope beyond death.

VENUE-HOST-MENU-GUESTS-MESSAGE and finally

VI. The Atmosphere

People talk about mood-lighting, mood-music, I'm in the mood for this, I'm in the mood for that...

But there is a unique set of attributes that God is modelling to us through his banquet that no special music can create, that no amount of cocktails can produce, that no dimmed lighting can ever emulate:

**The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth.
The Lord has spoken.**

Imagine a place where every single tear you have ever shed will be wiped away. Every single root of sadness will be pulled out and thrown away.

² Abdul the Syrian refugee, after 2 years, disappeared and cut contact with my friend, who later heard from another refugee that Abdul left because he felt he was wavering in his muslim faith.

Imagine a place where everything that has ever made you self-conscious, embarrassed, or humiliated. Every mistake you made with fade into oblivion in the bright presence of the messiah.

A place where we can say as the prophet did:

9 In that day they will say, 'Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.'

Prayer: Courage-Humility-Zeal-Compassion-Discernment-Privilege