



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The Parable of the Banquet St. Luke 14:16-24 & Deuteronomy 20:1-9

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June 14, 2026

I am often asked about “application” in sermons. “I enjoy a good sermon,” someone will say, “but I need to have application so I know what to do with it.” Well, you will notice that neither Fr. Bill nor I, his understudy, do very much with “application.” The pulpit is not the place to give you “ten steps to a better marriage” or “key principles of childrearing” or “the blueprints to build a Christian business.” Rather, we are concerned with the Biblical story, and we want to apply *you* to it, so that you read the Bible as your story. When Paul says, “These things happened as examples for us, upon whom the ends of the ages have come,” he means that to follow Jesus, we need to understand ourselves as being part of the story of the people of God. That is why Hebrews 11 gives us the “hall of faith”; it is why Stephen’s sermon in Acts 7 sums up the entire history of Israel; it is why, when Peter is telling Christian wives to respect their husbands, he calls them “daughters of Sarah.” We are consistently told to inscribe ourselves into the story of God’s people Israel. There is *nothing* more practical. Indeed, if we do not get this right, no amount of “application” will work.

Our lectionary for this morning pairs Deuteronomy’s laws about exemption from military service with Jesus’ parable of the banquet and the excuses made by those who were invited. It is, if we think about it, a very odd transposition, rather as though military language had found its way into a wedding or some similar occasion:

“WILT thou have this Woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honour, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?”

“Yes, sir, corporal, SIR. Hoo-ah!”

So what is going on here? To understand the parable, we need to think about the nature of banquets and the nature of the excuses. Let’s start with the excuses.

Verse 20’s excuse, “I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come” is an allusion to Deuteronomy 24:5. That passage gives the grounds for the exemption of any newly married bridegroom from military service for a year: “that he may bring happiness to his wife whom he has taken.” There is here something of the logic of the law against boiling a kid in its mother’s milk: in both cases, one must not mix up life and death, joy and sorrow.

In verse 18, we should understand “I have bought a field and must go out and see it” to mean that the transaction needs to be complete. It is the “closing” of a real estate purchase, not an inspection at leisure that could just as easily be postponed for another day. Legally, socially, this is a very good excuse.

Verse 19’s excuse about needing to test “five yoke of oxen” recalls the calling of Elisha by Elijah in 1 Kings 19:19. There, Elisha is actually in the middle of plowing when Elijah throws his mantle over him: “Tag, you’re it!” This is an act of sudden investiture. Elisha responds to it with alacrity: “he left the oxen and ran after Elijah” and said, “Please let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.”

The excuses are such powerful ones that they actually have statutory warrant in Biblical law. Legally, socially, by all the etiquette of ancient

Israel, these excuses are golden, unimpeachable, valid. But in the parable, *they are not good excuses in the eyes of the host*. Who is he? He is introduced as ἄνθρωπός τις, “a certain man.” Immediately, we recall other parables:

“A certain man planted a vineyard, leased it to vinedressers, and went in a far country for a long time.” (Mt 21:33)

“A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it, and found none.” (Lk. 13:6) “A certain man had two sons.” (Lk. 15:11)

“A certain rich man had a steward, and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods.” (Lk. 16:1)

There are other instances where “a certain man” is someone else, but this is a pretty good sample of instances where “a certain man” is instantly known to stand for God. The parable, then, shows us God’s response to the excuse-makers. Note that the “certain man” operates through servants. God is frequently depicted this way, sending his angels and human prophets to do his bidding and deliver his messages.

God’s reaction to the refusal of his invitations is anger (ὀργισθείς). This requires some explanation. In Matthew’s gospel, the banquet is a wedding feast for a king’s son, and the invited guests behave much like the wicked vinedressers: they “lay hold of his servants and treat them violently and kill them.” But Luke’s version has a different emphasis. It is less allegorized and is designed rather to highlight the reversal of fortune and the approaching deadline. “Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the city and bring here the poor and crippled and blind and lame.” — all of them likely to be beggars, likely to smell bad, likely to be shabbily dressed. Precisely the sort of unsightly people one does not want at a banquet, any sort of banquet.

They would never have been invited had not the originally invited guests refused. Just as Esau rejected his birthright and Jacob received it; just as the majority of the Jews rejected the Messiah so that the gospel might be preached to the gentiles, so here, as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 1:28,

“God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no flesh might boast in the presence of God.”

This is something God did in history. Unlike every other religion on earth, the Bible makes public claims about events that took place at particular times:

“In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against the fortified cities of Judah and took them.”

“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.”

Or even in our Nicene Creed, where week after week, we make mention of the name of a corrupt Roman official named Pontius Pilate.

Contrast the claims of other religions: that Mohammad was out there in the desert and an angel appeared to him and dictated the Quran. That Joseph Smith was guided by an angel named Moroni and found gold plates inscribed with “Reformed Hieroglyphics” which he translated into King James English. That Siddhartha Gautama was meditating under a fig tree and became enlightened. The Mary Baker Eddy or L. Ron Hubbard or some other guru has discovered the secrets of the universe. Even in antiquity, the Stoic sage or Epicurus or the philosopher in

Plato’s Republic is never about history. It is always private revelation or special understanding of timeless truths or the realm of forms or deep insight into nature.

By contrast, the assumption of Jesus’ parables is that God deals with Israel in time. The invitation to the banquet and the host’s angry reaction to the invited guests refusal, and the verdict at the end of the story that “none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet” — all presuppose that Israel is facing a decisive crisis in its history. The invitation to the banquet is the gospel summons to follow the Messiah — and this is appropriate, since Jesus is so frequently shown feasting during his earthly ministry. He feasts so much that he incurs the charge of being a glutton and a winebibber. Everywhere he goes, he feasts. He feasts in the house of the Pharisee named Simon; in the house of a tax collector named Zacchaeus; at a wedding at Cana; in company with immoral women, and with “tax collectors and sinners.” This was unusual even by Jewish standards, so that some come to Jesus and ask him, “The Pharisees and the disciples of John fast a lot, but your disciples do not fast.” Jesus explains that the disciples of Jesus do not fast *because the bridegroom is with them.*

What is the appropriate response to the invitation? What do etiquette and emotional rightness and social expectation dictate? Jesus’ words about John’s ministry and the Jews’ reaction to it, in Luke 7:32, are couched in similar terms:

*“We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
We mourned to you, and you did not weep.”*

The refusal to recognize Jesus as the one Israel has been waiting for is like the refusal of the invitation to the feast. It is a rejection of the good ending of the story, a refusal to take part in the consummation. It is as if all

the actors walked off the stage of a Shakespeare play after act 4.

There are times when we want to describe a process that has failed to produce its intended fulfillment and consummation — say, when I am talking to my Greek students who are struggling with Greek grammar and vocabulary. If they never go on to actually *read* Greek literature, I say it is like “a courtship without a marriage.” *This is not about timeless truths or Buddhist spiritual enlightenment.* A marriage is a historical event. That is the language that God uses about his relationship with his people. The coming of Jesus is the climax of Israel’s story. And to everyone, the invitation poses the stark alternative: either enter into the banquet, or be excluded. Remember the older brother of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:

Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ But he was angry and refused to go in. (Luke 15:25–28, ESV)

Or we may recall the words of Jesus after he has healed the centurion’s servant in Matthew 8:11:

I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. (Matthew 8:11–12, ESV)

Or there is the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in Matthew 25:

And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut.

11 “Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open to us!’
12 But he answered and said, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ (Matthew 25:10–12)

Or we may remember what C.S. Lewis calls the “unforgettable words” in John’s gospel’s account of the Last Supper, once Jesus has handed the sop to Judas and told him, “What you are going to do, do quickly”:

So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night. (John 13:30, ESV)

It was night. Judas is literally in the outer darkness. To be excluded from the banquet, to be shut out in the darkness, away from the light and joy of the wedding or the feast or the Passover meal, is all the more tragic in light of the fact that those who are excluded are the very ones who had *been invited*. Jesus “came to his own, and his own did not receive him.”

The result is a crucial difference between Judaism and Christianity over the place of Jesus in the story of the people of God. Can you be a Jew and believe in Jesus? It is a silly question. All the original disciples were Jews. As Peter says, “The promise is to you and to your children” and “You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.’ (Acts 3:25, ESV) But can you follow Rabbinic Judaism and believe that Jesus is the Messiah? That is a different question.

The Church places Jesus at the hinge of history, dating our years with the words “Anno Domini” from his first coming and looking forward to his second coming, when he will judge the quick and the dead. Judaism, by contrast, denies that Jesus is the Messiah, and insists that all the passages of Scripture that point to him — the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham, Joseph and his brothers, the suffering

servant in Isaiah, “behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel”, Zechariah’s “behold your king comes to you, meek and having compassion, lowly and riding on a donkey,” David’s beloved son Absalom suspended from a tree and pierced by a spear, and all the rest — are really not about him.

Christians say, with Paul, “Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us; therefore, let us keep the feast.” In saying this, we are saying that Christ is the climax of the story. It is the natural function of feasting to mark consummations. Weddings, coronations, graduation, retirements, anniversaries, birthdays — all are marked by parties, cakes, feasting, toasts, ceremony. And that is the difference between Christianity and Judaism: Has the story of Israel reached its climax? Has the bridegroom come? Does history now stand revealed as His story? Or are we, with the Rabbis, in the position of insisting that the messiah has *not come*, and that the Passover does not point to him. God had promised Moses that

“I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him. And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him.” (Deuteronomy 18:18–19, NKJV)

And the rabbis say, “Jesus is certainly not the prophet like Moses, but unfortunately he is so much like Moses that we had better delete Moses from the Passover liturgy, lest Christians start using the haggadah to persuade Jews to follow Jesus.” And that is what they have done. David Daube says,

“...[T]he figure of Moses, dominating the Biblical narrative of the exodus from Egypt and, naturally, at one time prominent, too, in the celebration of

the deliverance on Passover eve, is radically eliminated: in the Passover eve liturgy as it stands, his name is not mentioned once in any of the prayers and recitals woven around the Biblical record, and, more than that, no Biblical passage mentioning it is quoted. It is a fantastic *tour de force*. Think what it means. It is as if one were to spend annually a night commemorating Britain’s rescue in the Second World War, rehearsing the main course of events as well as telling elaborate stories about them — without once mentioning Churchill. A fantastic *tour de force*: but there must be no human Mediator.

We are left with a religion full of pointers that were designed to lead us to Jesus as the climax of the covenant, but the rabbis insist that they do not; a religion of tabernacle and temple that are all about God dwelling with His people, but now that Jesus has come, and ascended and sent the Holy Spirit, complete with the sound of “a mighty rushing wind that filled the whole house where they sat” just like God moving into the temple of Solomon and the tabernacle of Moses — now, *no*, the rabbis say, *it is not about Jesus*. But then, Judaism no longer has a temple, and the entire system that God gave in the Torah does not work without the Temple. The emperor Constantine’s grandson, Julian the Apostate, hated Christianity and decided he wanted to prove it false, and the way he decided to do it was by rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem that had been destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD, in fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecies on the Mount of Olives. Julian died before he could do it.

Again, Judaism is a religion whose Scriptures promised the forgiveness of sins, so that God’s people could live with him, and that demonstrated, as though by a gigantic show and tell of continual slaughter of animals for centuries, of daily splashing of blood against the altar, of red heifers sacrificed every year on the day of atonement, that the forgiveness of sins

would happen through blood. But now, the rabbis tell us, the death of Christ was not the fulfillment of the sacrificial system — and oh, by the way, you can't offer sacrifice anymore, anyway. There are still people named "Cohen" or "Cohn" — my mother in law's family, for instance — but they are more likely to be making movies than sacrificing animals. They continue to set out a cup for Elijah, that forerunner of the Messiah promised in Malachi. And Jesus says, "But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him but did to him whatever they wished. (Matthew 17:12, NKJV)

The church father, Athanasius of Alexandria puts it this way in his *On the Incarnation*:

So the Jews are telling fables, and putting off the time which is actually now... They are suffering like one, maimed in mind, who might see the earth illumined by the sun, but denies the sun which illumines it. For what more has he who is expected by them to do when he comes? Call the Gentiles? But they have already been called. To make prophet and king and vision to cease? This has already happened. To refute the godlessness of idols? It has already been refuted and condemned. To destroy death? It is already destroyed. What then must Christ do, which has not been done? Or what is left unfulfilled, that the Jews now rejoice and disbelieve? For if, as we see, they have neither king, nor prophet, nor Jerusalem, nor sacrifice, nor vision, but the whole world is filled with the knowledge of God, and those from the Gentiles are abandoning godlessness, and henceforth taking refuge in the God of Abraham through the Word, our Lord Jesus Christ, it should be clear even to those who are exceedingly obstinate that Christ has come, and that he illumines absolutely all with his light and teaches the true and divine teaching concerning his Father.

We are about to partake of Holy Communion, which is rightly understood as a continuation of Jesus' meals with his disciples, and an anticipation of the great wedding feast of the Lamb at which "many will come from east and west and recline with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." The Holy Communion is thus truly the consummation of the story of people of God. By partaking in it, we share in Christ our Passover. We have been crucified with Him, so that we may also share in his resurrection. We locate ourselves in the story of Israel, which is the story of the Messiah. And we recite the shape of the story and inscribe ourselves in it when we say, "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again."