

Isaiah 55

Well I wonder if you can remember what the last invitation you received was. Perhaps it was to a birthday party, or yet another wedding, or a house warming party or something.

The last invitation I received was to a meal with Patricia Hewitt, MP, the Health Secretary. It was some nice slap up meal followed by some political spin, no doubt.

Well, I believe that as Christians we should flee from temptation, and it would certainly have been tempting to go along and kick Ms Hewitt in the shins for the mess she's making of the health service, so I had to decline her kind invitation.

But it's interesting to think about what it is that makes us turn down an invitation that we receive.

Well this passage in Isaiah 55 here is all about an invitation as well. It's an invitation from God, to his people, the Israelites, who at the time were exiled in Babylon.

So firstly,

The invitation you can't refuse, vv1-7.

What is it, then that makes you decide whether or not you want to go accept an invitation, or refuse it?

The first question to ask, I think, is what kind of party or event is it? Do I have to pay to get in? What's going to be on offer? What will the food and the music be like? Will I be expected to dance?

Well, let's see what God is inviting his people to. READ v1-2.

That is some invitation, isn't it? God is laying on a meal for people. A free meal! "Without money and without cost". Now whenever you hear that something is free, chances are it's not going to be that good. You know, plastic cups and paper plates and some squashed ham sandwiches. But that's not the case here – this free meal is going to be fantastic. It's more like a banquet.

The drink is great – water, to quench the thirst, and then milk and wine. And the food, verse 2, isn't your typical "free lunch" food. It's good food. It's "the richest of fare". It's gourmet. It's delightful. And it's all free!

It's an amazing invitation. And what's even better about it is that it's not as if the people invited to it have lots of other options. It's not like a Saturday evening when if you're lucky you have 3 or 4 different options for things to do. You know, out to the cinema, or in for a DVD. Out for a meal, or in for a takeaway. Out to the pub, or in with a glass of wine.

No, the people invited to this party weren't invited to any others. If they didn't go to it they'd stay thirsty and hungry.

They'd have to settle for eating and drinking things which don't actually do them any good. Which don't satisfy. So there's a note of exasperation in God's voice as he invites people to this party - "why spend money on what is not bread, why labour for things which do not satisfy?" I'm offering you the best food and drink, and it's free – please come, don't settle for anything else, it won't do you any good."

It would be daft for them not to go, wouldn't it? It's a no-brainer. I mean, imagine they'd thought for a while and said

“hmmm, I’m hungry and thirsty and can’t afford to buy food and drink for myself. Here’s this offer of free gourmet food and drink ... but, naaahhh, I can’t be bothered to go”

But of course, this isn't talking about real food and real wine and water. Look at verse 3 – READ 3a. This is about much more than being full physically. The stakes here are life and death for their souls.

God's free banquet is the best thing in the world, because what's on offer is the most important thing in the world.

Now if you're not a Christian here this morning, I wonder if you perhaps think that the whole Christian thing is just a little bit pointless. An interesting little addition to life, perhaps, but not really worth taking too seriously.

But can you see that that is not what it's about at all? It's about the really important things – life and death. Satisfaction and fulfilment, or hunger and futility.

We can live our little lives in this world, and seek our thrills in all sorts of things. Whether it's holidays or relationships or good nights out or successful careers or being liked or whatever it is. Can I say to you that those things will never satisfy you? You will always be looking for that next experience, that bigger house or bigger pay packet, prettier girlfriend or more luxurious holiday.

Well, God says to you the words of verse 2 – READ. There's something so much better you could have. And God is offering it to you, for free.

That is not pointless, that is the most important thing in the world.

But this is something that Christians need to hear as well. You see, too often the **reason** that our friends and family who aren't Christians think that Christianity is nothing more than a strange little sideline in our lives, is because that's all we treat it as. Actually, we're often spending **our** money on what is not bread and working for things which will never satisfy us.

We still look for our satisfaction in the same things that everyone else **around** us does.

We need to hear verse 2 as well, don't we. Oh, we might even give God lots of our time and our money – but do we **delight** in God and in the new life he gives us?

We need to delight in hearing God's words, feasting upon them in the same way that when you go out to that posh restaurant or home for some of mum's home cooking, you feast on that and savour it and talk about how wonderful it is.

It must be the gospel and his blessings to us in Jesus the things that make our souls rejoice and our hearts delight.

If we did that, don't you think our friends would actually notice a difference in us as they see us being fulfilled and satisfied, while they are not? I think they would.

But the invitation isn't quite over yet. We'll come back to verse 4-5, but in v6-7, the invitation is repeated. READ.

And it's another invitation to come to God, to seek him and accept what he's offering.

And this time the offer is mercy and pardon. Compassion and forgiveness.

Except there's an added urgency, isn't there? READ v6. You

see while this invitation is open to anyone who wants, it isn't open forever.

I went to the theatre the other night and on the tickets it said "doors open at 7pm, the performance starts at 7.30pm. Anyone arriving late will be prevented from entering the auditorium until the interval".

This invitation from God reads "the doors are open now. Come in and take your place at the banquet table. Anyone arriving after the doors close will not be allowed to enter. Ever".

We're not told what time the doors close, so wouldn't it be absolutely daft to put off coming in one more second?

Yet that is what so many people do! They hear the gospel, the Christian message, they are intrigued by it, they even deep down know it's true – but they put off making a decision about it. I wonder if that is what you are doing.

But it's a dangerous thing to do because the offer will one day end.

So, the invitation is to a great banquet. There's life on offer. There's satisfaction for our souls. There's forgiveness and pardon and mercy and compassion in abundance. And it's all free. Isn't that an invitation you can't refuse? It would be daft not to come in, wouldn't it? Now?

But as well as deciding whether or not the invitation is a good one, there is a second thing that we might have to think about before we accept an invitation. Because in a world of advertising and spin, and of

disappointments and anticlimaxes, just having a great invitation might not convince us to go to the party. We live in a world which is suspicious and cynical, don't we?

We want to be really confident that what they say is going to be happening, really is going to happen. Is it really going to be "the best party in the world ever?" Is it really going to be good food, good music, and good dancing, or is it actually going to be undercooked quiche and Tesco Value lemonade, Maurice McCracken's taste in music and Andrew Evans on the dance floor?

We can receive the best invitation in the world, but anyone can send out a good invitation, but not everyone can pull it off, can they?

So let's see, secondly,

The host who will deliver... v 8-11.

Put yourself in the shoes of an Israelite hearing Isaiah say this. Isaiah, this is all very well, but have you forgotten how angry God has been with us? So angry with us that he has let us be exiled. He let Nebuchadnezzar destroy Jerusalem. The temple was destroyed. He's been **really** angry with us!

So, I find it difficult to believe that he's going to forgive us, let alone forgive us **for free!!** It all just sounds too good to be true.

God's answer to that kind of thinking is in these verses. And he gives 2 reasons that this invitation isn't too good to be true.

Firstly, because of who he is, what he is like.

You see, it's not that he is blind to the sins of the people, he's already said that back in v7 - his people's ways are wicked, and their thoughts are evil. Yet he still promises to forgive them – and this is the important bit, notice how he uses the same language, of thoughts, and ways, in verses 8-9. READ.

These verses, 8-9, are often used to say how we can't understand God. We're puny little humans, while he's God, and we can't understand him. But while that may be true, it's not what these verses are about at all.

You, he's saying, might be wicked and evil. Your society might be wicked and evil. They might hold grudges, they might not forgive. They might not be merciful and compassionate. You might be used to getting revenge and bearing grudges and broken relationships. But I'm not like you. My ways are not like your wicked ways. My thoughts are not like your evil thoughts.

We live in a world, don't we, where relationships fail us. And that can scar us. It can make us suspicious of people's motives, suspicious that what they say they are going to do is not actually what they **are** going to do.

And we begin to think "well, how do I know God **isn't** like that?" Or, "well, he might be kind enough to forgive me, but I just don't believe he's going to do it for free. I'm going to have to try and pay him back somehow.

But this is God saying "no, I'm not like that". I am not like you. I love to forgive those who turn to me, to forgive them freely and abundantly.

Isn't that just wonderful?

I wonder if this reminds you of the parable that Jesus told of the Prodigal Son. A boy runs away from home as a rebellion against his father, sticking two fingers up at him, doing all sorts of things he shouldn't have. Eventually he realises what a mess he's made, and with nowhere else to go, he returns home, hanging his head in shame.

But he returns home **hoping** that his father will take him back in and perhaps be kind enough to let him be a servant. He doesn't imagine for a second that he'll be able to go back to how things were.

He thinks he has gone too far, done too much wrong, for his Father to forgive him. But what does his Father do? He welcomes him back with open arms, and throws a party with the finest food. The prodigal son didn't realise how loving and forgiving his Father was.

I wonder if we, too, don't realise how forgiving God is? Is one of the things which is stopping you becoming a Christian that you just don't believe you can be forgiven – certainly not forgiven for free?

Or perhaps you are a Christian but there are things that you have done which you just think "you know, that is always going to be marked against me. I'm never going to be able to be as blessed by God and as loved by God as I could have been. I've just gone too far. I'm doomed to be a second class Christian forever.

Perhaps it's sex and relationships where you've messed up, or that secret habit that's driving you mad with guilt. Perhaps you are sitting here this morning and you're very aware of how sinful you are and frankly you feel like your life is a sham and

a disgrace.

Is that you this morning?

Well, while every day we see humans struggling to forgive one another, the wonderful news is that "God's ways are higher than our ways, his thoughts are higher than our thoughts". He isn't like us. He forgives and is merciful to us.

I wonder if you're still struggling to believe this. Well, let me list for you a few of the things which Isaiah says the Israelites had done. And as I do, remember that these things are things which God says can be freely forgiven.

Rebellion, evil, guilt, corruption, forsaking God, rotten from head to toe. Prostitution, murder, drunkenness, pride, hypocrisy, injustice, arrogance, lying, perversion, bribery, idolatry, stubbornness, adultery, sorcery and child-murdering.

There really wasn't much that they hadn't done, was there? And God here promises to forgive them ... **if** they call out to him and turn to him.

Turning to him, or repenting, simply means deciding to change our thinking and say "right God, I'm not going to run after things which will never satisfy me, I'm going to follow you now,". And if we do that, he **promises** to forgive us.

So, the host will deliver, because of who God is. The second reason, v10-11, is **because of what God has promised**. Look at verses 10-11 now – READ. Note that these verses begin with the word "for", or "because", which the NIV misses out for some reason. But it's a continuation of God's answer to this idea that his forgiveness might not be guaranteed.

And in these verses, he says that his word is certain. What God says he is going to do, his promises, are certain. We can be as certain of them, as we can that where rain falls, plants grow, v10. Rain and snow water the earth, they make it fertile, they make it "bud and flourish". Perhaps Isaiah here is taking us back to verses 1-2. The rain of God's word, his promises, produces the food that his people need.

Here in England, we don't really associate rain with plants growing. We get rain so often that the connection just isn't as strong in our minds. But in a desert situation like the Middle East, it would be striking. There would be no rain for days or weeks or sometimes months, during which time the fields would be dry and dusty. Then the rains would come, and hey presto, within a day or two the little green shoots would start poking through the ground.

As surely as night follows day, plants followed rain.

As surely as plants follow rain, God's word will be fulfilled.

You see, God had promised to bring his people back from exile. He had promised to keep his covenant with David, that's what verse 4 and 5 are saying, and to create a never-ending kingdom that will be the envy of the world.

When God promises something, it stays promised, no matter what people like me and you might do to try and ruin things. I think that's amazing!

It is wonderful, but there is also a word of caution. Because remember verse 6? These promises are open to everyone, but not forever. Only while he is near, while he may be found. Just as God promises not to abandon his people, to forgive those who repent, he also promises to judge those who don't.

And if his word that says "I will forgive those who turn to me" is certain, so is his word that says "I will punish those who **don't** turn back to me".

So, we can be confident that God's invitation will not disappoint us. His banquet of life and forgiveness is real and will happen, because of who he is, what he is like, and because he has promised to.

Finally, then, and more briefly, we see **The kingdom that will never end, v12-13.**

God ends verse 11 saying that his purposes will be achieved, and then verses 12-13 we're told more of what those purposes are.

Look at verse 12 – READ. The exile **will** end, Israel will be released from exile, peacefully, and joyfully. On the way back to Jerusalem they would have to travel through mountains and hills, which would normally be dangerous and scary – the mountains housed robbers and ambushes and wild animals. But on this journey, the mountains and hills will be singing as well! All of creation will be singing and clapping their hands, rejoicing at what God has done.

Verse 13 – instead of desert plants, thornbushes and briars, will grow useful plants, plants which signified blessing, pines and myrtles.

It is going to be a wonderful time for God's people. Back to verse 4 and 5 again – they'll be led by someone like King David. Instead of being ruled by other nations and exiled to strange foreign nations, they will rule other nations and other nations will come to **them!** And this new kingdom will never end, at the end of verse 13 there.

But the thing is, this isn't quite how things worked out for Israel, was it. They did return from exile, but they never experienced the amazing kind of never-ending Kingdom that God promises here.

And of course, as Isaiah has done time and time again, what he's really talking about here is not fulfilled in the return from exile, but fulfilled in Jesus. All through this chapter, it's Jesus who is in mind.

Because it was Jesus who said "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink." Jesus, who said "I am the bread of life", life which satisfies. Jesus, the Son of David who will rule the whole world. Jesus, who, as Andrew taught us last week, is the reason we **can** be forgiven. **He** was punished, so that we can be rescued and know peace. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him.

Jesus, who is God's Word, who will accomplish all his promises.

And it's Jesus' never-ending Kingdom that is ultimately being spoken of in v13.

The very last book of the Bible, Revelation, tells us more about this never-ending Kingdom that Jesus will bring.

In chapter 21 Jesus says these words:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself

will be with them and be their God. 4He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

It's going to be a wonderful kingdom.

Jesus goes on and says later:

"The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life."

And then the final words of Jesus in the Bible - "Surely, I am coming soon".

Jesus is extending us an invitation that we would be daft to refuse. A free gift of a satisfied life, eternal life. It really is on offer, because God is merciful and compassionate and loves to forgive.

The banquet he's putting on is never going to end, his never-ending kingdom is going to be **fantastic**. I can't wait.

But some day, the doors are going to be shut. Jesus is coming soon, and when he comes it will be too late to decide to accept.

"Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn from his ways and turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon".