

The Great Invitation

But He said unto him, A certain man made a great supper; and he bade many: and he sent forth his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come, for all things are now ready. And they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a field, and I must needs go out and see it: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come. And the servant came, and told his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor and maimed and blind and lame. And the servant said, Lord, what thou didst command is done, and yet there is room. And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and constrain them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say unto you, that none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper.

Luke 14: 16-24

Today we often hear it said: one hardly dare think about the future. It is better not to allow one's thoughts to dwell upon what may or will happen. There are many Christians also who think and speak like this. But in the gospel and in the life of the first Christian community it was not so. There the future was precisely what people thought much about and anticipated with keen and joyful expectation. For there the future meant the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ,

and to that event they looked forward, as it is said in I Peter, “with unspeakable joy”. In our parable, too, which the Lord narrated at a meal taken in the house of the pious man who was His host, it is a question of the future. This parable of the great supper might also be entitled: the great invitation. The whole gospel is an invitation. The prophets and after them Jesus the Son of God Himself came to issue an invitation to men. For what end or to what precisely do they invite us? This parable gives us the answer: to the great feast in the kingdom of God. This feast means table fellowship with the Host, glorious and eternal communion with the living God who is our Creator and the Lord of our future.

Thus it is a question of the great and splendid future—that future which is the fundamental theme of the gospel and which filled the hearts of the first Christians with joy unspeakable. Why is it that we Christians to-day experience and manifest so little of this unspeakable joy concerning the future, the kingdom of God which is coming upon us?—for that is the essential meaning of the word future. When we are in a position to look forward to something good we cannot but feel a certain eager expectancy. We look forward even though the good which we anticipate is long in coming and between our present situation and that future good all sorts of trials await us. Just think how we look forward to Christmas in spite of the fact that beforehand there is much heavy work that we must get through. In our thought we leap over the weeks of painful toil in order to fix our minds on what is to come, on the glad and holy festival celebrated in chant and hymn. The future towards which our thought is directed is not only something which will materialize at a certain date but, properly speaking, it is what gives tone and inspiration to our life here and now. A man who sees no future for himself is melancholy and depressed, lacking in courage and broken in spirit. A man who has reason to look forward to the future is eager and courageous. He hastens forward to meet it as it were with joyful stride. He is animated by the thought of it and the whole direction of his life is determined by it.

We men are so made that we must; live in this forward-looking way and that our life inevitably consists in an anticipation of the future. It is for this reason that the question of the future and of our hope in it is so important. What then are we to think of our future? It is of course utterly unknown to us and in so far as we are able to foresee it somewhat it hardly suggests that we can look forward to it with eagerness. When we think of the concrete possibilities which

the immediate future holds, our minds fly at once to all that we read in the newspapers. We inevitably think of the possibility of a third world war or other gloomy political events which hang over us like threatening storm clouds. And when we think of our own personal ultimate destiny we cannot avoid the thought that the final thing we know about the future is just the fact that we must die. How in such circumstances could one look forward to the future with any eagerness of anticipation?

But we Christians to whom the gospel has been preached, and who are ready to believe it, must not confine ourselves to the picture of the future which we can conjure up in our own minds but must look beyond it to the vision of the future which the Lord Jesus Christ proclaims to us with the fullness of divine authority: the great supper, the eternal future, everlasting life in communion with God and all our brothers and sisters in His eternal kingdom.

To this great feast we are all invited; all of us without exception are invited to look forward to this consummation, this most perfect conceivable goal, and to appropriate it as our own. It does not come to us automatically; we are to accept the invitation; we must exert ourselves to lay hold of it. But the invitation is open to us all. And now in the parable of the Lord the unbelievable thing happens: the invitation is not accepted, all sorts of excuses are invented in apology and every imaginable loophole of escape is ingeniously devised. Men do not go to the feast. And that brings me back to the question which I put to you at the beginning: why do we fail to anticipate the future with joy? The answer can only be: because we do not truly accept the invitation offered to us. Because we do not truly believe in the reality of it, or because we think that there are more important things to think about.

I am not now speaking of unbelievers, of the heathen (I shall speak of them later), but of Christians. For this parable is concerned precisely with believers themselves, with the pious, who do not accept the invitation and on whom therefore the Lord pronounces His terrible and severe verdict: None of those men which were bidden shall eat of my supper. Supposing that were said of us, of us Christians who have received the invitation and who, as we say, are precisely the people professing to believe in God, in Jesus, and in the Bible? What then does it mean to accept or not accept the invitation? How can we put ourselves to the test to discover whether we are accepting it or not?

Our first and fundamental answer to this question must be: assuredly they do not accept the invitation who do not properly believe in it. Whoever does not believe in the future reality of the kingdom can also not embrace it and help to embody it.

Hence Jesus narrates this parable to us and the theme of my preaching to-day—not merely to you but also to myself—is the necessity to test ourselves and see whether we really believe in the coming of the kingdom. Do you believe in the infinite splendour of the future in the eternal kingdom of God, which must mark the end of all human history and of the individual human life according to the will of God? Do you believe that God invites you personally to His great supper? That is clearly the crucial question. There cannot be a more important question either in my life or in your life or in the life of anyone: do you believe that you personally are bidden and that the invitation means eternal communion with God and with the family of all mankind?

My friends, I cannot answer for you. What I can do and will now do is simply this: I will draw your attention somewhat to the way in which and the reasons for which so many do not accept the invitation, and thus I will point out the various symptoms in which a fundamental unbelief is manifested. Some say: this teaching of an eternal kingdom of God is too remote from my needs. I would certainly like to cherish a hope for the future but not for a future so distant. I would like to be able to entertain hopes for the life of the here and now, not simply for the life of eternity; hopes which are capable of realization in this world, not only in the world that is to come.

I have heard people who really want to be Christians say: eternal life does not interest me at all, I am interested only in this world. And then they generally attempt to distort the message of the eternal kingdom of God so that it becomes a message concerning the progress of good on this earth. Jack wants to know more than his master, Christians insist on knowing better than the Lord Jesus Christ Himself and His apostles who always when they speak of the kingdom of God mean the eternal kingdom, the life of the world to come.

But, such people usually add, is it not right and proper that we should concern ourselves chiefly with what is taking place and will take place on this earth? The Bible teaches us the opposite and experience suggests that the more men occupy themselves only with

this world and its temporal interests, and do not believe in eternal life or turn away from it, so much the worse do things go even in this space-time world and its concerns. What we are experiencing to-day in the life of the individual and the life of humanity, of the nations and of the whole civilized world, is to be understood as the effect of a sort of panic fear of the end. Because men do not believe in eternal life therefore they suppose they must pack everything into their life in this world. For, they reason, afterwards there will probably be annihilation. And the result is that their reaction to this world takes one of two forms and often both together: the illusory dream of an earthly paradise and the despair of attaching any meaning whatsoever to life. The illusion of establishing an earthly paradise, which might also be described as utopianism, is one manifestation of the sickness of our time. Men insist on realizing these Utopias at any cost, and since that cannot be done so easily they use violence in order forcibly to bring about their realization. That is the origin of the violence and tyranny so typical of our age. Once a great thinker said: "When men insist on creating paradise they create hell." That is true, and how profoundly true it is we are finding out to-day. The other possible result when men no longer believe in eternal life or cease to concern themselves about it, is despair. They then see nothing but meaninglessness in their life and in the life of humanity. Everything is being precipitated towards the abyss and the finality of death. There exists in fact to-day a philosophy of downright despair, which of course describes itself by other names, but the meaning of which in practice can be summed up in the terms: after all death comes at last and all is hastening towards the gulf of death. Hence life has no meaning and can only give rise to despair. This consequence flows from the fact that in Christianity itself the message of the great supper and of the eternal kingdom of God is no longer believed.

But unbelief and the refusal to follow up the invitation can also take a less obvious form. For instance, people say: I do indeed already believe in that truth but for the present and in my present circumstances other things are of greater importance to me. This course represents the postponement of the invitation until at some future date a convenient moment arrives. Here and now and under present circumstances one has other things to do and think about; both in regard to thought and action. The great invitation remains so to speak in the background, just as in one's correspondence the most urgent letters are placed on top and the less urgent which can wait are shoved beneath, with the idea that they can be dealt with at some

more convenient time. Do we not often act thus? Hence to every one of us the solemn warning comes to-day: do not act thus, do not postpone the matter, otherwise you might find it is too late. God sends the invitation to you to-day and wills that to-day you answer Him. Indeed He Himself has come to invite you: "Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone will open to me, I will go in and sup with him."

Let me illustrate what I mean by a story. Two neighbours have quarrelled and parted company for some reason or other. Then it occurs to one of them that this situation is just not right. He writes a letter to his former friend suggesting that they make peace. He receives no reply. Come now, he thinks, I must try again. "Let us make peace and resume our former friendly relations." Still no reply. Then the man decides one evening—it is a bitterly cold winter's night with howling wind and snow—to undertake the long journey to the other man's house on foot. He arrives panting, snowed up, and petrified with cold. He repeats by word of mouth his invitation. And now it begins to dawn on his neighbour that he has before him a real human being, frozen, drenched with snow, and panting. Now his heart melts and he takes the invitation seriously. Now he says Yes.

This neighbour is God. He has written to us many a letter and we have not answered Him. Finally He Himself has come to dwell as a poor man among men, as one who had not where to lay His head, finally as one who was slain on the cross because men refused to believe in His invitation. And yet in that hour the eyes of some were opened: such is the love of God towards us, so piercing is His invitation that we cannot now fail to say yes.

That, my friends, is the meaning of the Christmas message. That is the sense of the whole gospel of Jesus Christ the crucified. God repeats His invitation but this time not merely with a letter, getting up early and sending His prophets, this time He comes Himself to us as the crucified Saviour so that we may realize how serious He is about His message of peace. The Saviour in His parable alludes to the fact that the invited do not seriously pay attention and for various reasons decline. He is thinking of the Jews, most of whom declined. Of course the apostles too were Jews but they constituted a very small minority. The greater part of Jewry emphatically said no. But God will not allow Himself to be defeated by those who decline. When that happens He invites others. Jesus is alluding to the Gentiles, to whom the invitation goes when the Jews decline.

But for us this means: if you Christians, who for two thousand years have been in receipt of the invitation, fail to accept it, then it will go to the heathen. And that is the point which we want to bear particularly in mind on this missionary Sunday. What the Lord declared has been wonderfully fulfilled in our time too. The gospel of Jesus Christ and of His great supper has come to the heathen and comes constantly to them. But that also has happened which the parable teaches—they have accepted it—not all, of course, only a small percentage, but nevertheless it amounts already to many millions in all parts of the earth. And their acceptance of it has not been purely formal. What struck us particularly at the Amsterdam conference of world Churches was the fact that precisely the representatives of the so-called young Churches—the Churches in India, Africa, Indonesia and so on—sounded a clear note of joyful faith and hope in such a way as to give us the impression of a living, sincere and spirit-filled Christian life. The situation now is certainly no longer that which obtained in former ages of missionary activity, when the European and American Churches were the givers and those others the receivers. The page has turned or is in the process of turning; the new Churches are the givers and we the receivers. This revolution has at least begun, and—let us not forget—this has happened as a result of centuries of devoted and self-sacrificial missionary work. It is impossible to foresee what it will mean for the world and also for ourselves when the seed of the gospel will have borne fruit a hundredfold among these nations which have had to wait so long to hear the word, and now with such eagerness and longing seize upon their invitation to the great supper.

But the parable of the Lord reminds us of something else. There are also, even among ourselves, even at home, in so-called Christian Europe, heathen without number. Missionary work has therefore become an urgent necessity among ourselves, and in this respect too we can already say how often it happens that just those who previously knew nothing and wished to know nothing of Christ and His Church receive the word with an impressively keen faith, and how so often it is seen, just in their lives, that the man who really believes, really says yes to the invitation, is born again and becomes a new creature, since he now has a lively hope which fills him with joy unspeakable and lends to his life a seriousness of responsibility which formerly he did not know.

Jesus narrated the parable to the Jews who were living in the faith that they were the chosen people and that the kingdom of

God belonged to them. We are the rightful heirs of the promise, they thought. Hence they rocked themselves in their complacent self-security, in the thought of having and possessing. Because of this saturation in self-security and self-righteousness they were not in a position to understand the message of Jesus. They considered Him to be a false Messiah and a blasphemer. Thus they crucified Him. That was their answer to the invitation which He brought to them personally in the name of God.

And now we Christians stand in the very same danger. We think the gospel belongs to us and do not realize that its implications are universal. We have so often read but never really understood or believed that the first shall be last and the last first. From childhood you have heard the gospel preached, are confirmed, and go to church. Very well. But are you also quite so sure that you have accepted it? Christian baptism proves nothing other than that you were once bidden to the feast. It does not prove that you are following up the invitation. Your churchgoing, your Bible reading, your prayers—all that is very well; but even that does not show that you have really accepted the invitation. The Jews, too, read their Bible, went to the synagogue, and prayed. And yet most of them did not belong to the small number of those who accepted the invitation. The inviting is God's concern: it is the word of God's unfathomable and infinite grace going out to all and promising to all eternal life—the greatest thing that a man can hope for. But the appropriation of that message is our concern, the opening of the door, for God does not deny us the freedom of coming to Him.

But what are the signs by which we may discover whether or not we have accepted the word? The first sign is that shown by the publican whom God contrasts with the Pharisee; the one says: God be merciful to me a sinner, and because he was himself invited, all unworthy, he wishes to extend a welcome to all others and thus does not presume to set himself over against them as one who is righteous and can look down on the unbelieving, unrighteous, and heathen world. The second sign is this: that with joy and earnestness one looks forward to and deems nothing more important than the great consummation, the great feast of eternal communion with God in His kingdom; thus one becomes a man who orientates his life towards this eternal goal and lives in confident and joyful anticipation of it. And the third sign—which of course can only count along with the two others—is the effort to bring the gospel within the reach of others who in

truth are not more unworthy than ourselves so that they too may be invited and prepared to receive the invitation.

The last sentence of the parable (“I tell you that none of those that were bidden shall taste of my supper”) is not said to make us afraid but to incite us to serious self-examination and to jolt us out of our satiation and smugness and our tendency to postpone indefinitely our acceptance. Yet you never know how much more time you still have. Pull yourself together and utter a wholehearted joyful and confident Yes. Live henceforth in the glad certainty that all life and your life is pointing towards this glorious end. Live in the serious endeavour to equip yourself for the coming of that glorious time and to go forward to meet it.

SAMPLE