

“Let My House Be Full!” (Lk 14:15-24)

15. When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the **kingdom** of God."
16. Jesus replied: "A certain man was preparing a great **banquet** and invited many guests.
17. At the **time** of the **banquet** he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'
18. "But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a **field**, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.'
19. "Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.'
20. "Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.'
21. "The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the **house** became angry and ordered 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.'
22. " 'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.'
23. "Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my **house** will be full.'
24. I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a **taste** of my **banquet**.'

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Prayer:

I would like to draw two principles for church growth from this well-known parable.

1. The Desire of God

First, our God wants his house full with happy, satisfied and grateful guests.

The desire of our God is clearly shown in v. 23: "Go out and make people come in, so that my house be full."

The parable is given in response to a remark from one of the guests which expressed a typical Jewish hope of participation in the heavenly banquet: "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God". So with the parable,

Jesus talks about the heavenly banquet. Then the host, 'a certain man' in the text, refers to God Himself. The great banquet is a standing figure of salvation, as Howard Marshall interprets in his commentary. God has prepared a great banquet for all people. The delicious food is ready. The best wine is prepared. The musicians and the entertainers are ready. Furthermore, he has prepared eternal life, the living water, the forgiveness of sins. He has prepared the best robe and a ring that assure us a full status and all the privileges of real sonship.

With all those blessings in store, God, out of his bounty, offers a most generous and gracious invitation to come to this heavenly banquet. God is full of love, goodwill and generosity. How full of irony it is that those invited do not take the invitation seriously. They do not appreciate it, and turn it down and refuse to come, with clever but hollow excuses.

Although the guests made their excuses independently, their combined refusal to come is surprising. "They all alike," unanimously refused to come, even though they had confirmed with RSVP's according to Jewish custom among the upper class. The refusal is extraordinary; it shows that somehow the guests hesitated to associate with the host, though they dared not ignore him.

The host is disappointed and angry, quite rightly. But his response is totally surprising. He wants to go ahead with the banquet with the underprivileged and down-casts. He took positive action. The master sent out his servant urgently; "Go out quickly" in v. 21. The translation in the Message Bible reads: "Quickly get out into the city streets and alleys. Collect all who look like they need a square meal, all the misfits and homeless and wretched you can lay your hands on, and bring them here. The servant reported back, 'Master, I did what you commanded – and there's still room.' The master said, 'Then go to the country roads. Whoever you find, drag them in. I want my house full!'" What the Master says is, 'I don't care who comes and where they are coming from. My house must be full. I can't let food wasted, and the party spoiled. The Banquet will go ahead!'

Most scholars say that with this parable Jesus indicates that the gospel would reach the Gentiles as the originally invited Jews refused. This may be right.

But I see something more in our contemporary days. God has called in so many Africans, Latinos, and Asians in the past a half a century or so, whilst so many people in the West refuse to acknowledge the grace of God. Now the church in the global south is bigger than that in the global north. The missionary force from the non-West is bigger than from the West.

You cannot stop God's desire to save people, for '[God] wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4). 'For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea' (Habakkuk 2:14). This is God's overwhelming desire! 'Whoever calls upon the name of the Lord Jesus will be saved' (Romans 10:13). This is God's overwhelming desire!

So, when the Jews do not come to the banquet, God invites the Gentiles. When the West do not come to the feast, God invites the coloured people, poor people uneducated people of the non-West. Because his longing is to see his house full, his party joyful and appreciated! God wants to see his churches in the UK and Europe both old and new full. As you will know Europe is the only continent where the church is not growing. Membership has been declining rapidly in the past 50-60 years.

Over 10,000 churches have been closed down in the UK alone during this period. The size of many remaining churches is getting smaller, and the age group getting older. Europe marks the lowest percentage of the Evangelicals in the world today. According to the latest edition of Operation World, published in October 2010, the Evangelicals in the North America are 26.8% of the population, in Africa 17.7%, in Latin America 16.7%, in Asia 3.5%, but in Europe only 2.5%!

Certainly there are some churches being planted. There are some growing healthy churches. But we cannot deny the over-all decline of the church in the UK.

The Independent reported the result of Dr Peter Brierley's survey on Palm Sunday 2000, with the headline, "The Church Will be Dead in 40 Years!" Earlier at the WCC congress in Zimbabwe on 14th December 1998, Dr George Carey, the then Archbishop of Cantabury, said, "The [British] Church is bleeding to death."

The ministry for the next generation is not really taking off. Some 40% of the churches in Britain have no Sunday school programme. 49% of 4000 teenagers in Cornwall did not believe the existence of God; only 22% said they believed in the existence of God. Despite the fact so many churches have been closed down, the number of remaining churches is still greater than the number of the ordained ministers in the UK. That's why many ministers in the rural areas have to look after 3-4 churches, or even 7-11 churches. Many of the Bible colleges in the UK have been closed down, or struggle with shrinking financial resources and the number of students.

Let's hear the heartbeat of the Lord: "Let my house be full". God wants the

churches in the UK and Europe FULL again, not with religious people, but with the real followers of Christ. God has not replaced the churches in Europe with the churches in the non-West, just as God has not replaced Israel with the Church. He longs for both. God's soteriology is not a replacement soteriology, but an inclusive soteriology. He includes the Gentiles in the salvation promised to Israel. Israel rejected God's offer of salvation, and so God made the blessing available to the Gentiles, but he will eventually bring massive revival among the Jews as indicated in Romans 11.

Likewise, God has made the blessings available to the non-West, but God will surely give another chance to rebuild the churches in Europe.

"Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will **raise** up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings" (Isaiah 58:12).

Europe seems like the Israel described in Ezekiel 22. The religious leaders, political leaders and people of Israel were so corrupt that God decided to destroy them all. Nevertheless, toward the end of the chapter we read of the gracious God, who tries NOT to destroy them, only if one man pleads him not to do so.

"I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none (Ezekiel 22:30).

God has a deep concern for Europe. His eyes stay on Europe. He waits for someone to plead to bless Europe again with the gospel.

I have seen and heard the heartbeat of God for Europe. It was at the Tokyo 2010 Global Mission Consultation & Celebration. Over 2000 missionary and Christian leaders gathered from almost 100 countries for a four-day conference in May 2010. It was a special and meaningful occasion as it was set up to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the first international missionary conference which was held in Edinburgh in 1910.

Tokyo 2010 was a profitable and wonderful time of learning, networking and fellowship. During the four days, many plenary lectures were given, many messages preached, many ministries introduced and many regional reports presented.

But there was one occasion, just one, when the entire congregation stood up and raised hands and voices in prayer. Many prayed in tears. The prayer meeting was spontaneous and moving.

That was just after Stefan Gustavsson, General Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance in Sweden, presented a plenary paper on Europe. He described how and why the churches had declined in Europe. He gave a warning to other continents. He also appealed to Christians to pray for Europe and to send workers to Europe.

Those who had come from Europe and who worked in Europe were invited to come forward to pray near the stage. So I went forward together with 60-70 people. While a thousand people were praying aloud, the MC softly beckoned me to come up to the stage. Immediately I sensed that he wanted me to close in prayer.

I had only seconds to walk to the stage. As I went up the steps, I prayed silently and yet desperately.

“What shall I pray, Lord?”

Instantly the Lord gave me three points to pray for.

“Thank Europe. Comfort Europe. I love Europe.”

With these items I sincerely prayed to God.

There was a loud round of applause after my prayer. It was not for me, but an expression of our commitment to pray for Europe and to do something for Europe.

To me the prayer time was special. The fact that this was the only occasion we prayed so sincerely impressed itself upon me. This was not an ordinary mission conference. On the one hand we were there to look back for the last 100 years and to give thanks to God. On the other hand we were there to seek the Lord’s will to set up the strategy for the coming 100 years.

There and then God showed his heartbeat for Europe. God loves Europe, and the people and his church in it. He has Europe on his heart. God wants his churches in Europe and in every continent revived and full.

But HOW?

We can find one vital answer from the parable.

In such a heavenly banquet, everyone is important: the host, the cooks, the party organizers and the guests. In this parable the only one who takes a prominent role apart from the master, is the servant.

2. The Role of the Servant

The second message is that, following the role-model of the servant, we should carry out our role and duty to compel the guests to come to the heavenly banquet.

The servant in the parable is obedient to the master in sending out the invitations. The servant persistently goes from one guest to another to urge them to come. He goes out for the second time, and then the third time. He is also faithful in reporting back the situation. V. 21: 'The servant came back and reported all this to the master' fully and correctly. He works hard. Note that only one servant is doing all the invitation business, but makes no complaint. You can imagine him running from one house to another, one street to another, in the city and in the countryside.

This servant takes his master's command seriously. He takes his master's business seriously. He takes his master's interest seriously.

He is given a vital role to invite the guests to fill the house for the banquet. And he has done his part very well. He is a good and faithful servant to the master.

Imagine if this servant had not gone out to give invitations.

Imagine if this servant sent out invitations and did not follow them up, just expecting the guests to turn up.

Imagine if this servant did not run around quickly. Hardly anyone would come in time, and the food would get cold.

Imagine if this servant did not compel and persuade the totally suspicious downcast people to respond to this unbelievable invitation. None would come to the party. The banquet would be far from full

So he went out to everywhere and anywhere to drag them in (in Eugene Peterson's vocabulary). He himself must have been convinced that the banquet would be excellent, otherwise he would not wholeheartedly drag them in.

The same command is given to us.

It is our role and duty to GO OUT quickly wherever we can find whoever, and make them come in, so that [God's] **house** will be full.' **We are not just inviting people into a nice meal, but to an everlasting heavenly banquet** which God has prepared together with his Son Jesus Christ.

So, Go out quickly.

Go out regularly.

Go out continually.

Go out prayerfully.

Go out joyfully, and sometimes tearfully.

This is the best way to reach people with the gospel.

A regular, continuous and prayerful outreach is a forgotten strategy in expanding the kingdom of God. Many believers know that they have been commanded to go and preach the gospel, to share what they have found and experienced in Jesus. But not many believers share the gospel, especially here in the UK, because we think evangelism is un-British! It is an excuse, isn't it? The command was given to all believers in all countries and in all cultures. A regular, continuous and prayerful outreach is a key for church growth in all countries and in all cultures.

During these three days, we are learning about Church Growth by Cell groups. A Cell group is not just a Bible study group, prayer group, worship group, pastoral care group; it should also be an evangelism team.

Mobilise the cell groups for outreach. Send them out as a team to invite people in.

'An Evangelism Team in Every Church' is my catchphrase wherever I go. The Doulos evangelism team planted one church in India in January 1988. When we visited the same port, Visakhapatnam in 2006, we found that they had planted 32 churches in 18 years with one evangelism team. I know a church in Sri Lanka that experienced growth in the church and planted 16 churches in 16 years with an evangelism team. In both cases, they went out as a team, regularly (once a week) and continually (for 16 years and 18 years).

You may say, "Ah, that's possible in India and Sri Lanka, but not here in the UK." I would say, "It also works here in the UK as well. By the providence and grace of God, my wife Helen and I got involved in church planting in Northwood, just outside the Greater London. We started with 9 adults including Helen and myself committed to the new venture. I ministered there for 6.5 years, and towards the first year 65 people attended the services.

We carried out door-to-door visitations every Saturday afternoon without fail over 6 years. It was possible simply because we had an evangelism team, which went out regularly, continually and prayerfully.

3Ms are necessary in evangelism training: **Motivation, Message, Methods.**

However, I found that these 3 Ms are not enough. People cannot continually carry on evangelism with these 3 Ms alone. Training is important for evangelism, but what is more important is **DOING** evangelism. In order to **DO** evangelism, regularly, continually and prayerfully, we need the 4th M: **Mobilisation!** The evangelism team can carry out outreach regularly and continually even if an individual would not be able to do so.

On the premises of this Trinity Church Brentwood, I believe God is leading me to open a church planting school with 20 Bible school graduates. With these people we are going to form three evangelism teams. They will go out to share the gospel two days a week to specific areas with the intention of planting churches, or to support and revitalize struggling churches. We would like to equip our students with a practical evangelism and pastoral training. Not only shall we teach 3 Ms, but also we should Mobilise them to put into practice what they have learned in the courses. Just imagine the people in Brentwood and surrounding areas hearing the gospel and responding to it as our teams go out regularly and continually.

Let's take the Lord command seriously: He urges us to go out and bring people in so that his churches will be full. Regular and continual going-out evangelism is a missing link, probably the weakest link in church growth, not just in the West but also elsewhere too.

How sad the Lord must have been to see thousands of churches closed down! He will surely and readily help whoever goes out in obedience to his command, "Go out quickly everywhere, anywhere, and compel and persuade anyone to come, so that my house will be full."

God wants his house full with happy, satisfied and grateful guests. He sends us out to compel people to come to the banquet. Our faithful obedience to his command by going out to drag them in promptly, regularly, persistently and prayerfully, would make all the difference for church growth locally and globally.

Pray that Europe would turn to Christ yet once again (1) in response to the generous invitation from God, and (2) as the result of the faithful obedience of his people to God's command to go out quickly, regularly, continually and prayerfully, to invite people in.

Let's diligently get involved with urging people to the banquet God has prepared for them. Let's dream that through of our work many more will be present at that great heavenly banquet together with the Lamb of glory!

(The End)