

The Third Sunday after Trinity (Second Service)
St Thomas, Salisbury, 2023

1 Samuel 24:1-17

Luke 14: 12-24

One of the bonuses of being a simple retired priest with Permission to Officiate in the Diocese is that you don't have to go to meetings! I boast to my full-time paid colleagues that I haven't been to a meeting for four years!

In the days when attendance at meetings, study days, clergy conferences and the like was required, we used to joke about who might be able to come up with the most improbable but just legitimate excuse for not going. I never quite had the nerve to send an email to the bishop saying, "My Lord, I'm afraid I can't come to the study day next week because I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm going to try them out."

We're asked to reflect this evening, on this Third Sunday after Trinity, upon excuses, and upon the nature of God's boundless welcome.

The parable of the great dinner sets before us God's desire to welcome us, God's desire to feast his people in celebration and in hospitality, and it sets before us, also, the capacity of humanity to not know a good thing when it is in front of us. To fail to recognise the real thing, and to evade blessings.

Those who have been invited to the dinner make excuses: I'm too busy. I've got other things to do. I need to look after my land. I need to check out these excellent oxen I've just bought. I'm too married!

They fail to recognise the grace and the generosity at hand, and having RSVP'd 'yes', at the last moment they don't turn up.

And in the face of that, what does God's grace do? Well, it just expands, initially to the dispossessed, the outsiders, those who wouldn't warrant an invitation in normal times. And then, when that's been done and there is still room, the invitation goes out to everyone – to the highways and byways so that, as the reading puts it, 'my house may be filled.'

Not for God the private dinner party for the elite. No, 'my house shall be filled', and not with those who have better things to do, but with those who would never imagine they would even be invited. Such is the generosity of God's kingdom. It is as full as can be, with anyone who would come in.

And it is merciful too. David finds himself in close quarters with Saul, at a moment of Saul's vulnerability. It's dark in the inner recesses of this cave. A moment to strike. A moment to kill Saul, to gain mastery. But instead he is merciful, and demonstrates that mercy by proving his compassion. Compassion in the face of the one who, according to the world's politics and agenda, is his enemy.

The choir have just reminded us, in that anthem, that the call upon the child of God is to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. To stand in awe of him. And to do that is to be, as he is, merciful, compassionate, to upset the politics of power. To recognise the greatest invitation when we receive it. To – however impressive a set of oxen we may *think* we have – remember that the feast of the Lord is greater by far. Amen.