

LUKE 12:1–12

Further Warnings

¹ Crowds were gathering in their thousands, so much so that they were trampling on each other. Jesus began to say to his disciples, ‘Watch out for the leaven of the Pharisees—I mean, their hypocrisy. This is a matter of first importance.

² ‘Nothing is concealed that won’t be uncovered; nothing is hidden that won’t be made known. ³ So whatever you say in the darkness will be heard in the light, and whatever you speak into someone’s ear will be proclaimed from the housetops.

⁴ ‘So, my friends, I have this to say to you: don’t be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more they can do. ⁵ I will show you who to fear: fear the one who starts by killing and then has the right to throw people into Gehenna. Yes, let me tell you, that’s the one to fear!

⁶ ‘How much do five sparrows cost? Two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten in God’s presence. ⁷ But the hairs of your head have all been counted. Don’t be afraid! You are worth more than lots of sparrows.

⁸ ‘Let me tell you: if anyone acknowledges me before others, the son of man will acknowledge that person before God’s angels. ⁹ But if anyone denies me before others, that person will be denied before God’s angels.

¹⁰ ‘Everyone who speaks a word against the son of man will have it forgiven; but the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

¹¹ ‘When they bring you before synagogues, rulers and authorities, don’t worry about how to give an answer or what to say. ¹² The Holy Spirit will teach you what to say at that very moment.’

It started off as an ordinary walk in the country. We decided to head off across open moorland towards a distant crag; the map suggested there might be a good view from the top.

Much of the walk was relaxed. The five of us went at our own paces, in twos and threes, some up ahead and others lagging behind, and it didn’t matter. When we got to the crag we assumed it would be a straightforward scramble to the top. But, half-way up, the leader slipped and fell, and though he didn’t fall far he’d clearly broken a bone and was in pain.

Suddenly the entire mood of the party changed. Instead of a casual stroll, this had to become a military operation. One of our number, a doctor, took charge and told us what to do. He expected instant obedience and he got it. Whatever we had wanted to do—we’d been looking forward to the view from the crag, which was now forgotten—we suddenly had a different set of priorities. We had to get our injured friend back to the car in one piece, and it would take the complete attention and loyalty of everyone else to achieve it.

Something like this shift takes place between the early chapters of Luke and where we are now. He is allowing us to see how, with Jesus on the long road to Jerusalem, tension is building up, opposition is becoming stronger, and anyone who wants to follow Jesus is going to have to become focused, totally loyal, ready for anything. The mood is not what many think of today as ‘religious’, where people attend a church service, maybe sense God’s presence and love for a few moments, and then return to ordinary life as though little or nothing had happened. This is much more like the concentrated campaign of someone running for high office, in a country

where political opponents and their supporters will literally come to blows, and perhaps try to imprison or impeach one another. What Jesus is doing demands total attention. Anything less, and disaster may follow.

Hence the stark warnings about what is whispered today being shouted from the housetops tomorrow. If the **disciples** go gossiping about what they hope Jesus will achieve, word will get round the villages, and before they know it Herod's men will be after them (see 13:31). Not that Herod, or even Rome, are the most dangerous enemy they have. They must be wise in what they say, but they mustn't be afraid of mere mortal enemies. The real enemy is the one who longs to cast people into **Gehenna** ('Gehenna' was the name of Jerusalem's smouldering rubbish-heap, and the word was already in use as an image of hell-fire). This cannot mean that one should fear God, though in some senses that is a good and right thing to do. It means that one should recognize who the ultimate enemy is. In this picture, God is not the enemy to be feared; he is one to trust, the one who values his children more highly than a whole flock of sparrows, who has the very hairs of our head all numbered.

With trust in God on the one hand, and the desperate nature of the battle on the other, Jesus' followers must stand by him. Loyalty must be total. Whatever happens on earth has its counterpart in **heaven**, and those who think to gain temporary earthly advantage by short-term disloyalty may find that whispered denials are broadcast far and wide. However, those who trust God will find that even if they are put on trial for their allegiance to Jesus they will be given words to say. God's own Spirit will teach them as and when they need it—which is not, of course, an excuse for poor preparation in a regular teaching ministry, but a sure promise for those who find themselves in sudden danger because of their loyalty to the **kingdom**.

In the midst of all this comes a dire warning which many have found disturbing. One may be forgiven for speaking against the **son of man**, but will not be forgiven for blaspheming against the **Holy Spirit**. In Mark and Matthew this saying occurs when Jesus has been accused of casting out **demons** by the prince of demons. If you say that the Spirit's work is in fact the work of the devil, you have begun to call evil good and good evil, a moral cul-de-sac without turning room. Here in Luke 12 the intention seems broader. Someone who sees Jesus at work and misunderstands what is going on may speak against him, only to discover the truth and repent. But if someone denounces the work of the Spirit, such a person is cut off by that very action from profiting from that work. Once you declare that the spring of fresh water is in fact polluted, you will never drink from it. The one sure thing about this saying is that if someone is anxious about having committed the sin against the Holy Spirit, their anxiety is a clear sign that they have not.

Loyalty, then, is required for disciples, not only when the **Twelve** were following Jesus on the road but when we, today, take it upon ourselves to enlist under his banner and follow where he leads. Luke 12 is a standing rebuke to all casual, halfhearted, relaxed Christianity. The warnings about dangerous foes, and the promise that our God knows and cares about the smallest details of our lives, combine to challenge us to dedicated, single-minded discipleship.

LUKE 12:13–34

The Parable of the Rich Fool

¹³ Someone from the crowd said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me!’

¹⁴ ‘Tell me, my good man,’ replied Jesus, ‘who appointed me as a judge or arbitrator over you?’

¹⁵ ‘Watch out,’ he said to them, ‘and beware of all greed! Your life isn’t defined by the number of things you possess.’

¹⁶ He told them a parable. ‘There was a rich man whose land produced a fine harvest. ¹⁷ “What shall I do?” he said to himself. “I don’t have enough room to store my crops!’

¹⁸ “I know!” he said. “I’ll pull down my barns—and I’ll build bigger ones! Then I’ll be able to store all the corn and all my belongings there. ¹⁹ And I shall say to my soul, Soul, you’ve got many good things stored up for many years. Take it easy! Eat, drink, have a good time!”

²⁰ ‘But God said to him, “Fool! This very night your soul will be demanded of you! Now who’s going to have all the things you’ve got ready?” ²¹ That’s how it is with someone who stores up things for himself and isn’t rich before God.

²² ‘So let me tell you this,’ he said to the disciples. ‘Don’t be anxious about your life—what you should eat; or about your body—what you should wear. ²³ Life is more than food! The body is more than clothing! ²⁴ Think about the ravens: they don’t sow seed, they don’t gather harvests, they don’t have storehouses or barns; and God feeds them. How much more will he feed you! Think of the difference between yourselves and the birds!’

²⁵ ‘Which of you by being anxious can add a day to your lifetime? ²⁶ So if you can’t even do a little thing like that, why worry about anything else? ²⁷ Think about the lilies and the way they grow. They don’t work hard, they don’t weave cloth; but, let me tell you, not even Solomon in all his glory was dressed up like one of them. ²⁸ So if that’s how God clothes the grass in the field—here today, into the fire tomorrow—how much more will he clothe you, you little-faith lot!’

²⁹ ‘So don’t you go hunting about for what to eat or what to drink, and don’t be anxious. ³⁰ The nations of the world go searching for all that stuff, and your Father knows you need it. ³¹ This is what you should search for: God’s kingdom! Then all the rest will be given you as well. ³² Don’t be afraid, little flock. Your Father is delighted to give you the kingdom.

³³ ‘Sell your possessions and give alms. Make yourselves purses that don’t wear out, a treasure in heaven that lasts for ever, where the thief doesn’t come near and the moth doesn’t destroy. ³⁴ Yes: where your treasure is, there your heart will be too.’

The modern Western world is built on anxiety. You see it on the faces of people hurrying to work. You see it even more as they travel home, tired but without having solved life’s problems. The faces are weary, puzzled, living with the unanswerable question as to what it all means. This world thrives on people setting higher and higher goals for themselves, and each other, so that they can worry all day and all year about whether they will reach them. If they do, they will set new ones. If they don’t, they will feel they’ve failed. Was this really how we were supposed to live?

Jesus’ warnings indicate that much of the world at least, for much of human history, has faced the same problem. The difference, though, is the level at which anxiety strikes. Many of Jesus’ hearers only just had enough to live on, and there was always the prospect that one day they wouldn’t have even that. Most of them would have perhaps one spare garment, but not

more. As with many in today's non-Western world, one disaster—the family breadwinner being sick or injured, for example—could mean instant destitution. And it was to people like that, not to people worried about affording smart cars and foreign holidays, that Jesus gave his clear and striking commands about not worrying over food and clothing.

We now know that anxiety itself can be a killer. Stress and worry can cause disease, or contribute to it—producing the enchanting prospect of people worrying about worrying, a downward spiral that perhaps only a good sense of humour can break. As with so much of his teaching, what Jesus says here goes to the heart of the way we are. To inhale a bracing lungfull of his good sense is health-giving at every level. But his warnings and commands go deeper as well, down to the roots of the problem he faced in confronting his contemporaries with the message of God's **kingdom**. This wasn't just good advice on how to live a happy, carefree life. This was a challenge to the very centre of his world.

The man who wanted Jesus to arbitrate in a property dispute with his brother was typical in his attitude, the attitude that many of Jesus' fellow-Jews took towards the Holy Land itself. The Land wasn't just where they happened to live; in the first century, as in the early twenty-first, possession of the Land was a vital Jewish symbol. Families clung to their inheritance for religious reasons as well as economic ones.

Jesus was coming with the message that God was changing all that. He wasn't tightening up Israel's defence of the Land; he was longing to shower grace and new life on people of every race and place. Israel, as far as he could see, was in danger of becoming like the man in the story who wanted the security of enough possessions to last him a long time. Societies and individuals alike can think themselves into this false position, to which the short answer is God's: 'You fool!' Life isn't like that. The kingdom of God isn't like that.

The kingdom of God is, at its heart, about God's sovereignty sweeping the world with love and power, so that human beings, each made in God's image and each one loved dearly, may relax in the knowledge that God is in control. Reflecting on the birds and the flowers isn't meant to encourage a kind of romantic nature-mysticism, but to stimulate serious understanding: God, the creator, loves to give good gifts, loves to give you the kingdom—loves, that is, to bring his sovereign care and rescue right to your own door. At the heart of the appeal is the difference that Israel should have recognized, between 'the nations of the world' and those who call God 'Father'—that is, between **Gentile** nations and Israel herself. If the gods you worship are distant and removed, or are simply nature-gods without personhood of their own, then of course you will be worried. If your God is the father who calls you his child, what is to stop you trusting him?

The final appeal, which will be repeated at various stages later in Luke, is not necessarily for all followers of Jesus to get rid of all their possessions. Luke himself, in Acts, describes Christian communities in which most members live in their own houses with their own goods around them, and there is no suggestion that they are second-class or rebellious members of God's people. Jesus is returning to the sharing of inheritance with which the passage began, and is advocating the opposite attitude to the grasping and greed which he saw there.

When he speaks of 'treasure in **heaven**', here and elsewhere, this doesn't mean treasure that you will only possess after death. 'Heaven' is God's sphere of created reality, which, as the Lord's Prayer suggests, will one day colonize 'earth', our sphere, completely. What matters is that the kingdom of God is bringing the values and priorities of God himself to bear on the

greed and anxiety of the world. Those who welcome Jesus and his kingdom-message must learn to abandon the latter and live by the former.

LUKE 12:35–48

Jesus' Call to Watchfulness

³⁵ 'Make sure you're dressed and ready with your lamps alight,' said Jesus. ³⁶ 'You need to be like people waiting for their master when he comes back from the wedding-feast, so that when he comes and knocks they will be able to open the door for him at once. ³⁷ A blessing on the servants whom the master finds awake when he comes! I'm telling you the truth: he will put on an apron and sit them down and come and wait on them. ³⁸ A blessing on them if he comes in the second watch of the night, or even the third, and finds them like that!

³⁹ 'But you should know this: if the householder had known what time the thief was coming, he wouldn't have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁰ You too should be ready, because the son of man is coming at a time you don't expect.'

⁴¹ 'Master,' said Peter, 'are you telling this parable for us, or for everyone?'

⁴² 'Who then is the faithful and wise servant,' said Jesus, 'whom the master will set over all his household, to give them their allowance of food at the proper time? ⁴³ A blessing on the servant that the master, when he comes, finds doing just that! ⁴⁴ I'm telling you truly, he will install him as manager over all his possessions. ⁴⁵ But if that servant says in his heart, "My master is taking his time over coming back," and begins to beat the slaves and slave-girls, to eat and drink and get drunk—⁴⁶ then the master of that servant will come on a day he doesn't expect him to, and at a moment he didn't imagine, and he will cut him in two. He will give him the same place as the unbelievers.

⁴⁷ 'If a servant knew what the master wanted, and didn't get ready, or do what was wanted, the punishment will be a severe beating. ⁴⁸ If the servant didn't know, and did what deserved a beating, it will be a light beating. Much will be required from one who is given much; if someone is entrusted with much, even more will be expected in return.'

My most embarrassing moment of the year came while waiting at an airport to check in for a flight to Tel Aviv. I was leading a small pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and we had risen very early in the morning to get to the airport on time. We had luggage, tickets, and ... only one passport between my wife and myself. It was hers that was missing. We searched bags, coats, and pockets. I telephoned my neighbour to go into my house and look there in case I'd left it behind. The other members of our party looked on in a mixture of sympathy and embarrassment. I won't even try to describe what my wife was thinking. Then, just as we were thinking she would have to come on the next day's flight, I moved a suitcase and out fell the missing passport. It had slipped down between two bags while I was checking the tickets, and had stuck there, invisible.

Going on a journey forces you to think carefully about what to take and how to get ready. It's no good suddenly thinking, when the plane is a hundred miles out and five miles high, that you'd like that other pair of shoes rather than the one you've brought! And Jesus' warnings in this passage begin with advice that was originally given to people going on a journey: the people who had to be properly dressed and ready for action were the Israelites getting ready for the sudden **Exodus** from Egypt (Exodus 12:11). As we have seen, Luke highlights the Exodus theme at various points in his story of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, and the passage in question here points particularly to the first keeping of Passover. The Israelites were to eat that meal already dressed for their journey, so that they could be up and off at a moment's notice.

The way Jesus develops the picture retains this strong sense of urgency, but casts his followers as servants waiting for their master to come home from a particularly long dinner party. (The 'second watch' of the night was around midnight; the 'third watch' was the last stretch before dawn.) As the picture goes on, it becomes more and more clear that Jesus is thinking just as much of the intended application as of the illustration itself. And when we follow the train of thought it is, at some points, quite terrifying.

Not only is Jesus engaged in a running battle with the powers of evil. Not only is he issuing a challenge to total loyalty in the face of opposition. Not only is he saying that God's **kingdom** now demands a complete reordering of priorities. He is now warning that a crisis is coming, a great showdown for which one must be prepared in the same way as servants who listen eagerly for their master's footfall and knock at the door. Jesus seems to have envisaged a coming moment at which the forces of light and darkness would engage in a terrible battle, resulting in his own death, and a devastating catastrophe for Israel in general and Jerusalem in particular. Though this passage and others like it have often been taken as predictions of Jesus' final return, Luke throughout his **gospel** seems to suggest that they refer principally to a complex of events which Jesus knew would happen within the lifetime of his contemporaries.

These events will therefore pose a serious test for the **disciples**. If they start to relax, to assume that because they are Jesus' followers all will be well (Jesus doesn't really imagine they will start to beat their fellow-servants; at this point the illustration is running away with itself), then they will find things will come upon them before they are ready. Jesus knows that the time cannot be far off. In a sense, indeed, he is on his way to Jerusalem to precipitate it. But he also knows that the disciples haven't understood more than a little of what is to come, and he must therefore warn them to be ready. He therefore returns to the picture of the servants and the master from several angles, and with repeated severe warnings.

Peter's question poses a nice point. Jewish stories about a master and servants are often simply about God and Israel, and at least one of Jesus' stories falls into that pattern (Luke 16:1–9). So is this picture of the master coming back home to be understood, from the disciples' point of view, as referring not just to them (as Jesus' 'servants') but to Israel as a whole?

The answer seems to be Yes: it does refer to the nation as a whole. From now on in Luke we shall find several warnings about what will happen to the nation as a whole, and to its central symbol, the **Temple**, if it does not realize that the master is returning. This picture looks forward to 19:11–27, which is not about the second coming of Jesus but about the return of Israel's God to Zion—which was happening, Jesus believed, then and there. The master came back, but the servants were not ready.

At the same time, the passage is often rightly used at ordination or commissioning services, when Christians join together to pray for those who are being entrusted with ministry in God's church. It is an awesome responsibility, and one to which the picture of the servants and the master applies quite well. It is a sobering thought that the one time when Paul talks about Christians facing some kind of negative judgment after their death (mostly he gives nothing but assurance of hope) he is speaking of leaders and teachers who have failed in their task (1 Corinthians 3:12–15). Evangelists and teachers, pastors and theologians alike face this responsibility: when the master comes, will they be found busy at their tasks, or taking their ease and abusing the household?

LUKE 12:49–59

Reading the Signs of the Times

⁴⁹ ‘I came to throw fire upon the earth,’ Jesus continued, ‘and I wish it were already alight! ⁵⁰ I have a baptism to be baptized with, and I am under huge pressure until it’s happened!’

⁵¹ ‘Do you suppose I’ve come to give peace to the earth? No, let me tell you, but rather division.

⁵² From now on, you see, families will be split down the middle: three against two in a family of five, and two against three, ⁵³ father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

⁵⁴ ‘When you see a cloud rising in the west,’ he said to the crowds, ‘you say at once, “It’s going to rain,” and rain it does. ⁵⁵ When you see the south wind getting up, you say, “It’s going to be very hot,” and that’s what happens. ⁵⁶ You impostors! You know how to work out what the earth and the sky are telling you; why can’t you work out what’s going on at this very moment?’

⁵⁷ ‘Why don’t you judge for yourselves what you ought to do? ⁵⁸ When you go with your accuser before a magistrate, do your best to reach a settlement with him. Otherwise he may drag you in front of the judge, and the judge will hand you over to the officer, and the officer will throw you into jail. ⁵⁹ Let me tell you, you won’t get out from there until you have paid the last penny.’

The great composer Ludwig van Beethoven used sometimes to play a trick on polite salon audiences, especially when he guessed that they weren’t really interested in serious music. He would perform a piece on the piano, one of his own slow movements perhaps, which would be so gentle and beautiful that everyone would be lulled into thinking the world was a soft, cosy place, where they could think beautiful thoughts and relax into semi-slumber. Then, just as the final notes were dying away, Beethoven would bring his whole forearm down with a crash across the keyboard, and laugh at the shock he gave to the assembled company.

A bit cruel and impolite, perhaps. And of course in many of his own compositions Beethoven found less antisocial ways of telling his hearers that the world was full of pain as well as of beauty—and also of making the transition in the other direction, bringing joy out of tragedy, including his own tragic life, in wonderful and lasting ways. But the shock of that crash of notes interrupting the haunting melody is a good image for what Jesus had to say at the end of Luke 12.

The crisis is coming, we have seen. It poses a challenge to absolute loyalty. But now even what we might have thought the **gospel** was all about is being stood on its head. Prince of Peace, eh? Jesus seems to be saying. No: Prince of Division, more likely! Once this message gets into households there’ll be no peace: families will split up over it, just as the prophets had foretold. The warnings about fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, and so on includes a quotation from Micah 7:6, a passage in which the prophet warns of imminent crisis and urges that the only way forward is complete trust in God.

Jesus, then, sees the crisis coming, a crisis of which his own fate will be the central feature (the ‘**baptism**’ which he must still undergo); and he is astonished and dismayed that so few of his contemporaries can see it at all. They are good at local weather-forecasts: clouds rolling in from the Mediterranean mean rain, and a wind from the hot and dusty Negev means sultry weather. So why can’t they look at what’s going on all around them, from the Roman

occupation to the oppressive regime of Herod, from the wealthy and arrogant **high priests** in Jerusalem to the false agendas of the **Pharisees**—and, in the middle of it all, a young prophet announcing God's **kingdom** and healing the sick? Why can't they put two and two together, and realize that this is the moment all Israel's history has been waiting for? Why can't they see that the crisis is coming?

If they could, they would be well advised to take action while there was still time. The final paragraph of the chapter is not to be taken as advice to people facing an actual lawsuit. As with several parables in Luke, it is far more likely that Jesus has in mind the crisis that has occupied much of the chapter so far. Israel, rebelling against God's plan that she should be the light of the world, and thus eager for violent uprising against Rome, was liable at any moment to find the magistrate—presumably some Roman official—dragging her off to court to face charges of sedition. Facing the prospect of complete ruin, she should urgently seek ways of coming to terms. In the event, as we know, the warning went unheeded. The Romans came in, magistrates, judges, officers and all, and in AD 70 Israel ended up paying the very last penny.

Jesus' warnings throughout the chapter reach something of a crescendo, and the chapter which follows continues the same theme. But, it might well be asked today, what relevance have these warnings for people who live nearly two thousand years after they all came true?

Part of the answer is that unless we understand the crisis facing Israel in Jesus' day, and the way in which Jesus responded to it, we won't understand what Jesus himself, and Luke as his interpreter, thought about his own death. That will be worked out in later chapters. But there is a further dimension.

The church has from early on read this chapter as a warning that each generation must read the signs of the times, the great movements of people, governments, nations and policies, and must react accordingly. If the kingdom of God is to come on earth as it is in **heaven**, part of the prophetic role of the church is to understand the events of earth and to seek to address them with the message of heaven. And if, like Jesus, we find that we seem to be bringing division, and that we ourselves become caught up in the crisis, so be it. What else would we expect?

In particular, there may come a time when Christian teachers and preachers find, like Beethoven with his salon audiences, that people have become too cosy and comfortable. Sometimes, for instance, the selections of Bible readings for church services omit all the passages that speak of judgment, of warnings, of the stern demands of God's holiness. Maybe there are times when, like Jesus himself on this occasion, we need to wake people up with a crash. There are, after all, plenty of warnings in the Bible about the dangers of going to sleep on the job.

LUKE 13:1–9

The Parable of the Fig Tree

¹ At that moment some people came up and told them the news. Some Galileans had been in the Temple, and Pilate had mixed their blood with that of the sacrifices.

² ‘Do you suppose’, said Jesus, ‘that those Galileans suffered such things because they were greater sinners than all other Galileans?’ ³ No, let me tell you! Unless you repent, you will all be destroyed in the same way.

⁴ ‘And what about those eighteen who were killed when the tower in Siloam collapsed on top of them? Do you imagine they were more blameworthy than everyone else who lives in Jerusalem?’ ⁵ No, let me tell you! Unless you repent, you will all be destroyed in the same way.’

⁶ He told them this parable. ‘Once upon a time there was a man who had a fig tree in his vineyard. He came to it looking for fruit, and didn’t find any. ⁷ So he said to the gardener, “Look here! I’ve been coming to this fig tree for three years hoping to find some fruit, and I haven’t found any! Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?”

⁸ “I tell you what, master,” replied the gardener; “let it alone for just this one year more. I’ll dig all round it and put on some manure. ⁹ Then, if it fruits next year, well and good; and if not, you can cut it down.”’

If the New Testament had never been written, we would still know that Pontius Pilate was an unpleasant and unpopular Governor of Judaea. The Jewish historian Josephus lists several things he did which upset and irritated the local Jewish population. Sometimes he seemed to be deliberately trying to make them angry. He trampled on their religious sensibilities; once he tried to bring Roman standards (military emblems) into Jerusalem, with their pagan symbols. He flouted their laws and conventions; once he used money from the **Temple** treasury to build an aqueduct, and then brutally crushed the rebellion that resulted. These incidents, and others like them, are recorded outside the New Testament, and help us to understand what sort of person Pilate was.

So it shouldn’t surprise us to learn that on another occasion, while some people on pilgrimage from Galilee had been offering sacrifice in the Temple, Pilate sent the troops in, perhaps fearing a riot, and slaughtered them. The present passage simply speaks of their own blood mingling in the Temple courtyard with the blood of their sacrifices—polluting the place, on top of the human horror and tragedy of such an event. It is as though occupying forces were to invade a church and butcher worshippers on Christmas Day.

Remind yourself for a moment where we are in Luke’s story. Jesus has decided to go to Jerusalem at the head of a party of Galilean pilgrims. If today I was planning a journey to a town under enemy occupation, and was told on the way there that the local governor was making a habit of killing visiting English clergymen, I suspect I would call my travel agent and book a flight to somewhere less dangerous.

These people, then, aren’t simply bringing Jesus information. Two questions hover in the air as they tell their shocking news. First, does Jesus really intend to continue his journey? Isn’t he afraid of what may happen to him there? And second, what does this mean? Is this the

beginning of something worse? If Jesus has been warning of woe and disaster coming on those who refuse his message, is this a sign that these Galileans were already being punished?

Jesus' stern comments address the second of these questions. (The first remains in the air throughout the chapter, until finally (13:31–35) we discover the answer: Herod is out to kill Jesus in Galilee, but Jesus knows that he must get to Jerusalem. Nowhere is now safe.) Yes, Pilate has killed Galilean pilgrims in Jerusalem; but they were no more sinful than any other Galilean pilgrims. Rather—and he is about to repeat the point—*unless you repent, you will all be destroyed the same way*.

The same way? That's the key. Jesus isn't talking about what happens to people after they die. Many have read this passage and supposed that it was a warning about perishing in **hell** after death, but that is clearly wrong. In line with the warnings he has issued several times already, and will continue to issue right up to his own crucifixion, Jesus is making it clear that those who refuse his summons to change direction, to abandon the crazy flight into national rebellion against Rome, will suffer the consequences. Those who take the sword will perish with the sword.

Or, if not the sword, they will be crushed by buildings in Jerusalem as the siege brings them crashing down. Siloam is a small area of Jerusalem, close to the centre of the ancient city, just to the south of the Temple itself. Building accidents happen; but if the Jerusalemites continue to refuse God's **kingdom**-call to repent, to turn from their present agendas, then those who escape Roman swords will find the very walls collapsing on top of them as the enemy closes in.

This terrifying warning, about the political and military consequences of not heeding his call, is at once amplified by the almost humorous, yet in fact quite sinister, parable of the fig tree in the vineyard. (People often planted fig trees in vineyards; it was good for the grapes.) Underneath the banter between the vineyard-owner and the gardener we detect a direct comment on Jesus' own ministry, and a further answer as to what's going to happen when he gets to Jerusalem.

There are two ways of taking the story, both of which give a satisfactory meaning and arrive at the same point. Jesus himself could be seen as the vineyard-owner. He has been coming to the Lord's garden, seeking the fruit of **repentance**, throughout his ministry. (We might take the 'three years' of 13:7 as an indication that Jesus' ministry had lasted that long, but it's more likely that it is simply part of the logic of the story.) So far, apart from a very few followers, who are themselves still quite muddled, he has found none: no repentance, not even in the cities where most of his mighty deeds had been done (10:13–15). He is prepared, then, to give Israel, and particularly Jerusalem, the Temple, and the ruling **priests** one more chance. If they still refuse, their doom will be sealed.

Or maybe it is God who has been coming to Israel these many years, seeking fruit. Maybe Jesus is the gardener, the servant who is now trying, as the owner's patience wears thin, to dig around and put on manure, to inject some life and health into the old plant before sentence is passed. Either way the end result is the same: 'If not, you can cut it down.' Luke's arrangement of the material from chapter 10 onwards leaves us in no doubt as to how he saw the matter: when Jerusalem fell in AD 70, it was a direct result of refusing to follow the way of peace which Jesus had urged throughout his ministry.

The passage therefore bristles with a double tension. Will Jerusalem repent and be rescued? And if, as he has been saying, Jesus expects to die himself when he goes there, how

do his fate and that of the city relate to one another? What is God up to? And, if we can begin to think about those questions, there are others for us to face ourselves. What is God up to in our world today? In our own lives? Are we bearing fruit for God's kingdom?

LUKE 13:10–21

Jesus Heals a Crippled Woman on the Sabbath

¹⁰ One sabbath, Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues. ¹¹ There was a woman there who had had a spirit of weakness for eighteen years. She was bent double, and couldn't stand fully upright. ¹² Jesus saw her and called to her.

¹³ 'Woman,' he said, laying his hands on her, 'you are freed from your affliction.' And at once she stood upright, and praised God.

¹⁴ The synagogue president was angry that Jesus had healed on the sabbath.

'Look here,' he said to the crowd, 'there are six days for people to work! Come on one of those days and be healed, not on the sabbath day!'

¹⁵ 'You bunch of hypocrites!' replied Jesus. 'You would all be quite happy to untie an ox or a donkey from its stall on the sabbath day and lead it out for a drink! ¹⁶ And isn't it right that this daughter of Abraham, tied up by the satan for these eighteen years, should be untied from her chains on the sabbath day?'

¹⁷ At that, all the people who had been opposing him were ashamed. The whole crowd was overjoyed at all the splendid things he was doing.

¹⁸ So Jesus said, 'What is God's kingdom like? What shall we compare it with? ¹⁹ It's like a mustard seed that someone took and placed in his garden. It grew, and became a tree, and the birds of the sky made nests in its branches.'

²⁰ And again he said, 'What shall we say God's kingdom is like? ²¹ It's like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until the whole thing was leavened.'

Let's, for a change, imagine that you are on the edge of the crowd that has followed Jesus so far. You haven't heard everything and haven't understood all you've heard, but you think you've got the general drift of it all and find it both compelling and alarming.

In you go with Jesus to the synagogue on this **sabbath**. What do you see, and what sense does it make to you?

You see—everybody sees—this poor woman. She was probably a well-known local character. In a village where everyone's life was public, people would know who she was and how long she'd been like this. Luke says she had 'a spirit of weakness', which probably means simply that nobody could explain medically why she had become bent double. Some today think that her disability had psychological causes; some people probably thought so then as well, though they might have said it differently. Maybe somebody had persistently abused her, verbally or physically, when she was smaller, until her twisted-up emotions communicated themselves to her body, and she found she couldn't get straight. Even after all the medical advances of the last few hundred years, we are very much aware that such things happen without any other apparent cause.

In the synagogue, though, you can see an unspoken power struggle going on. There is a synagogue president in charge of the meeting, but all eyes are on Jesus—which puts both of them in an awkward spot in terms of protocol. Jesus, however, doesn't wait. A word, a touch, and the woman is healed. The synagogue president, thoroughly upstaged, lets his anger take refuge in an official public rebuke, rather as if a policeman tried to arrest someone because their football team had just beaten his.

You, as the observer, understand all this. It's bound to be difficult for the local village hierarchy when someone like Jesus comes into town, and when he does extraordinary things in the synagogue it will inevitably cause a fuss. But listen to Jesus' answer. Think about what you've heard on the journey up to this point: the devastating analysis of what was wrong with Israel as a whole, the warnings of what lay ahead. Now hear what Jesus has to say, and ponder what it might mean.

'Double standards!' Jesus declares. 'You do one thing yourself and yet want to stop me doing something which is no different, and even more appropriate. This is just play-acting. You are quite happy (he must have known well enough what passed as legitimate sabbath practice and what didn't) to untie an animal that needs water; how much more should I untie this woman—Abraham's daughter, bound by the **satan**? And what better day than the sabbath?'

You get the point about untying the animal and untying the woman. But what is he saying about her? First, she's a daughter of Abraham; second, she has been tied up for 18 years by—the **satan**, the one who has Israel as a whole in his grip, the one against whom Jesus has won an initial victory! Suddenly new light dawns. What Jesus is doing for this poor woman is what he is longing to do for Israel as a whole. The enemy, the accuser, has had Israel in his power these many years, and Jesus' kingdom-message is the one thing that can free her. But Israel's insistence on tight boundaries, including the rigid application of the sabbath law, is preventing it happening. Unless the kingdom-message heals her, there is no hope.

Maybe, you think, Jesus is still hoping that there is time; that Israel, bent double and unable to stand upright, will be untied from her bondage in a great sabbath celebration, a great act of liberation. Maybe, you think, Jesus intends that by going to Jerusalem this will all come to pass ...

And then there are the little sayings, which Luke at least regards as explanations of what has just happened. The **kingdom** is like a tiny seed producing a huge tree—which can then accommodate all the birds in the sky. One action in one synagogue on one sabbath; what can this achieve? But when Jesus sows the seed of the kingdom, nobody knows what will result. Or the kingdom as a small helping of leaven, hidden apparently in the flour. It seems insignificant and ineffectual; but before long the whole mixture is leavened. One healing of one woman—but every time you break the satanic chains that have tied people up, another victory is won which will go on having repercussions.

Ponder what you have seen and heard. Would you go up to Jerusalem following this man? It might be risky. It might be unpredictable. But where else would you go?

LUKE 13:22–30

Entering through the Narrow Door

²² Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he went, making his way towards Jerusalem.

²³ ‘Master,’ somebody said to him, ‘will there be only a few that are saved?’

²⁴ ‘Struggle hard’, Jesus replied, ‘to get in by the narrow gate. Let me tell you: many will try to get in and won’t be able to. ²⁵ When the householder gets up and shuts the door—at that moment you will begin to stand outside and knock at the door and say, “Master, open the door for us.” Then he will say in response, “I don’t know where you’ve come from.” ²⁶ Then you will begin to say, “We ate with you and drank with you, and you taught in our streets!” ²⁷ And he will say to you, “I don’t know where you people are from. Be off with you, you wicked lot.”

²⁸ ‘That’s where you’ll find weeping and gnashing of teeth: when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in God’s kingdom, and you yourselves thrown out. ²⁹ People will come from east and west, from north and south, and sit down to feast in God’s kingdom. ³⁰ And, listen to this: some who are last will be first, and some of the first will be last.’

I sat in the airport for two hours, waiting for my onward flight. I had come in to New York on a flight from England, and I was tired and eager to catch the connection to Washington, to get to where I was staying, and to rest for the night. Finally the small plane began to board. My seat had been confirmed, and I knew it was near the plane door; so I waited until almost everyone had got on.

As I approached the gate, to my horror the attendant shut it in my face. He apologized profusely, and said he hated this part of his job. Due to some obscure regulation, he said, this flight only allowed a certain number of people on board, and that number was already seated. What about my confirmed seat, I asked, showing him the ticket, which he himself had stamped as valid some while before. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I know how you must feel. I am so sorry.’

He may have been sorry, but I was furious. I was too tired to make further protest, but wrote angry letters to the airline, and was eventually rewarded with US\$ 100 free travel vouchers to use in the next couple of months—which was, of course, no good to someone living in another continent. I don’t remember what time I got to bed that night, but I made a resolution never again to hang back when boarding a small aeroplane.

Jesus’ warning in this passage sounds as though it’s every bit as unreasonable as the airline regulation was that night. If you’ve got a confirmed place, surely you ought to be allowed on board no matter where you are in the line. It seems unfair for the householder to let people in up to a certain point and then, when he’s shut the door in the faces of the next people, to protest that he never knew them. But a moment’s thought about the whole sequence of teaching in Luke up to this point will reveal that the warning is very much needed.

The question about how many will be saved sends us to the question of ultimate and final salvation. Interestingly, Jesus refuses to answer this question directly; he will not give statistics and figures to satisfy mere human inquisitiveness. What he gives is a stern warning, not least because in the setting of his journey to Jerusalem ‘being saved’ is not simply a matter of ultimate destination after death, but the more immediate and pressing question of the crisis that hangs over the nation.

In this setting, his warning is both appropriate and necessary. As he goes about his mission, he is holding open the gate of the **kingdom** and urging people to enter it. The door isn't very wide, and it will take energy and commitment to get in; no question of strolling in by chance. One day, and not very long from now, the door will be shut, and it will be too late. God is giving Israel this last chance, through the work of Jesus, but he is the final messenger. If he is refused, there will be no further opportunity. The disciples in Acts urge people in his name to 'save themselves from this crooked generation' (Acts 2:40); if they do not respond to Jesus' call, they will pull down on themselves the judgment that 'this generation' has incurred. Those who wait to see what happens later, and who then presume that because they once shared a festive banquet with Jesus they will somehow be all right, will find that there are no promises for those who did not take the chance when it was offered.

The promise, and warning, of Jesus is that the very people his contemporaries were eager to fight—the **Gentiles** from east and west, north and south, who had over the centuries oppressed, bullied and harried them—might at this rate end up in God's kingdom ahead of them. The strange workings of God's grace, in which, though some are chosen for particular roles, none is assured of automatic privilege, mean that some who are first will be last, and vice versa.

We should be cautious about lifting this passage out and applying it directly to the larger question of eternal salvation. Jesus' urgent warnings to his own contemporaries were aimed at the particular emergency they then faced. But we should equally beware of assuming that it is irrelevant to such questions. Unless all human life is just a game; unless we are mistaken in our strong sense that our moral and spiritual choices matter; unless, after all, the New Testament as a whole has badly misled us—then it really is possible to stroll past the open gate to the kingdom of God, only to discover later the depth of our mistake.

LUKE 13:31–35

Jesus Grieves over Jerusalem

³¹ Just then some Pharisees came up and spoke to Jesus.

‘Get away from here,’ they said, ‘because Herod wants to kill you.’

³² ‘Go and tell that fox,’ replied Jesus, ‘ “Look here: I’m casting out demons today and tomorrow, and completing my healings. I’ll be finished by the third day. ³³ But I have to continue my travels today, tomorrow and the day after that! It couldn’t happen that a prophet would perish anywhere except Jerusalem.”

³⁴ ‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem! You kill the prophets, and stone the people sent to you! How many times did I want to collect your children, like a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would have none of it! ³⁵ Look, your house has been abandoned. Let me tell you this: you will never see me until you are prepared to say, “A blessing upon you! Welcome in the name of the Lord!” ’

The house I live in was built after the Second World War. It replaced the much older one that stood here before, which was burnt to ashes one night in 1941, after a fire-bomb, dropped by an enemy aircraft, landed right on it. The people who lived in the house were helping to save another building nearby, and by the time they got water-pumps to this house, and the one next door, it was too late.

In the ancient world fire was an ever-present danger. It was of course necessary for many aspects of life, but without modern precautions and fire-fighting equipment it could easily get out of control. Roman writers of the New Testament period speak graphically about fires in Rome’s crowded streets and tenements; the summer of AD 64 saw a fire in Rome that lasted a week and destroyed half the city. Though the word ‘fire’ does not occur in this passage, the powerful image Jesus uses here has it in mind. It isn’t, however, in a city, but in a farmyard.

Fire is as terrifying to trapped animals as to people, if not more so. When a farmyard catches fire, the animals try to escape; but, if they cannot, some species have developed ways of protecting their young. The picture here is of a hen, gathering her chicks under her wings to protect them. There are stories of exactly this: after a farmyard fire, those cleaning up have found a dead hen, scorched and blackened—with live chicks sheltering under her wings. She has quite literally given her **life** to save them. It is a vivid and violent image of what Jesus declared he longed to do for Jerusalem and, by implication, for all Israel. But, at the moment, all he could see was chicks scurrying off in the opposite direction, taking no notice of the smoke and flames indicating the approach of danger, nor of the urgent warnings of the one who alone could give them safety.

This picture of the hen and the chickens is the strongest statement so far in Luke of what Jesus thinks his death would be all about. But before we examine it further, we should go back to the earlier part of the passage. If chicks are in mind (at least for Luke; we cannot know whether verses 31–33, which do not occur in Matthew, were originally related to verses 34–35, which do), then the other great danger alongside fire was the predator, particularly the fox. And that’s the image Jesus uses for Herod.

For most of the story, Herod has cast a dark shadow across the page, but he has not until now posed an explicit threat to Jesus. The **Pharisees** here, who warn Jesus of Herod’s

intentions, may have been among the many moderate Pharisees who, like Gamaliel in Acts 5, were happy to watch from the sidelines and see whether or not this new movement turned out to be from God. They may, of course, have been secretly hoping to get rid of Jesus, to get him off their territory; but Luke gives no hint of that if it was so. What is more important is Jesus' answer.

Jesus clearly indicates his contempt for Herod. Everyone knew, after all, that his only claim to royalty was because the Romans, recognizing his father as the most effective thug around, had promoted him from nowhere to keep order at the far end of their territories. Jesus also strongly affirms his own strange vocation: yes, he will eventually die at the hands of the authorities, but no, it won't be in Galilee. Herod will have an indirect hand in it (Luke 23:6–12), but he remains a minor player.

What matters is that Jesus has a destiny to fulfil, as he has already stated (9:22, 44; 12:50). It consists, in picture-language, of two days' work and one day's completion. Two days to cast out **demons** and cure illnesses; 'and I shall be finished on the third day'. No careful reader of Luke's gospel could miss the echoes, backwards and forwards: to the boy Jesus, found on the third day in the **Temple** (2:46); to the risen Jesus, alive again on the third day (24:21).

Jesus' destiny, then, is to go to Jerusalem and die, risking the threats of the fox, and adopting the role of the mother hen to the chickens faced with sudden danger. But will Jerusalem benefit from his offer? Jerusalem has a long history of rebelling against God, refusing the way of peace (that sentence, alas, seems to be as true in the modern as in the ancient world). As Ezekiel saw, rebellion meant that the holy presence of God had abandoned the Temple and the city, opening the way for devastating enemy attack (Ezekiel 10–11). The only way for the city and Temple to avoid the destruction which now threatened it was to welcome Jesus as God's peace-envoy; but all the signs were that they would not. When Luke brings us back to this point again, it will be too late.

What can we see from the vantage point of the end of chapter 13? We can see, with devastating clarity, what Jesus' journey to Jerusalem is going to mean. Israel's greatest crisis is coming upon her, and he is offering an urgent summons to repent, to come his **kingdom**-way, his way of peace. This is the only way of avoiding the disaster which will otherwise follow her persistent rebellion. Jesus' intention now, in obedience to his vocation, is to go to Jerusalem and, like the hen with the chickens, to take upon himself the full force of that disaster which he was predicting for the nation and the Temple. The one will give himself on behalf of the many.

LUKE 14:1–11

Jesus and the Pharisee

¹ One sabbath, Jesus went to a meal in the house of a leading Pharisee. They were keeping a close eye on him.

² There was a man there in front of Jesus who suffered from dropsy. ³ So Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, 'Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath or not?' ⁴ They remained silent. He took the man, healed him, and dismissed him.

⁵ Then he said to them, 'Suppose one of you has a son—or an ox!—that falls into a well. Are you going to tell me you won't pull him out straight away on the sabbath day?' ⁶ They had no answer for that.

⁷ He noticed how the guests chose the best seats, and told them this parable.

⁸ 'When someone invites you to a wedding feast,' he said, 'don't go and sit in the best seat, in case some other guest more important is invited, ⁹ and the person who invited you both comes and says to you, "Please move down for this man," and you will go to the end of the line covered with embarrassment. ¹⁰ Instead, when someone invites you, go and sit down at the lowest place. Then, when your host arrives, he will say to you, "My dear fellow! Come on higher up!" Then all your fellow guests will show you respect. ¹¹ All who push themselves forward, you see, will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be honoured.'

Luke's **gospel** has more meal-time scenes than all the others. If his vision of the Christian life, from one point of view, is a journey, from another point of view it's a party. Several stories end with a festive meal—like, for instance, the **parable** of the prodigal son in the next chapter. These themes come together in the Last Supper and, finally, the story of the road to Emmaus in chapter 24.

In chapter 14 Luke has brought together two parables about feasting. The first, the one we have here in verses 7–11, is not always recognized as a parable, because it looks simply like a piece of social advice, of practical wisdom. You want to avoid embarrassment in front of your fellow guests? Then take this tip. But Jesus didn't come to offer good advice; and often his own conduct seems calculated to cause embarrassment. In any case, Luke tells us it's a parable (verse 7); in other words, we ought to expect it to have at least a double meaning. What is Jesus really talking about?

The rest of the chapter makes it clear that he's talking about the way in which people of his day were jostling for position in the eyes of God. They were, so it appeared to him, eager to push themselves forward, to show how well they were keeping the law, to maintain their own purity. They were precisely the sort of people he found himself with in the first section of the chapter (verses 1–6), people who would watch for any sign of irregularity, even at the cost of frowning upon actions, such as Jesus' healing of the man with dropsy, that made sense by their own actual standards. And Jesus, throughout this section of Luke, is turning things upside down. He is associating with the wrong kind of people. He is touching the untouchable and calling the nobodies.

The parable, then, isn't so much good advice for social occasions—though no doubt, within Jesus' world and beyond, there is practical human wisdom in the warning against pride and

arrogance. The real meaning is to be found in the warning against pushing oneself forward in the sight of God. In Jesus' day it was all too easy for the well-off and the legally trained to imagine that they were superior in God's sight to the poor, to those without the opportunity to study, let alone practise, the law.

At the same time, in the world for which Luke was writing, there would be an obvious wider meaning. Within Luke's lifetime thousands of non-Jews had become Christians—had entered, that is, into the dinner party prepared by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Many Jewish Christians, as we know from Acts, had found this difficult, if not impossible, to understand or approve. They were so eager to maintain their own places at the top table that they could not grasp God's great design to stand the world on its head. Pride, notoriously, is the great cloud which blots out the sun of God's generosity: if I reckon that I deserve to be favoured by God, not only do I declare that I don't need his grace, mercy and love, but I imply that those who don't deserve it shouldn't have it.

Jesus spent his whole life breaking through that cloud and bringing the fresh, healing sunshine of God's love to those in its shadow. The **Pharisees** could watch him all they liked (verse 1), but the power both of his healings and of his explanations was too strong for them. The small-mindedness which pushes itself forward and leaves others behind is confronted with the large-hearted love of God. All Christians are called to the same healthy dependence on God's love and the same generosity in sharing it with those in need.

LUKE 14:12–24

The Parable of the Great Banquet

¹² He then turned to his host. ‘When you give a lunch or a supper,’ he said, ‘don’t invite your friends or your family or relatives, or your rich neighbours. They might ask you back again, and you’d be repaid.

¹³ When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. ¹⁴ God will bless you, because they have no way to repay you! You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’

¹⁵ One of the guests heard this, and commented, ‘A blessing on those who eat food in God’s kingdom!’

¹⁶ Jesus said, ‘Once a man made a great dinner, and invited lots of guests. ¹⁷ When the time for the meal arrived, he sent his servant to say to the guests, “Come now—everything’s ready!” ¹⁸ But the whole pack of them began to make excuses. The first said, “I’ve just bought a field, and I really have to go and see it. Please accept my apologies.” ¹⁹ Another one said, “I’ve just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’ve got to go and test them out—please accept my apologies.” ²⁰ And another one said, “I’ve just got married, so naturally I can’t come.” ²¹ So the servant went back and told his master all this. The householder was cross, and said to his servant, “Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in here the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind.” ²² “All right, master,” said the servant, “I’ve done that—but there’s still room.” ²³ “Well then,” said the master to the servant, “go out into the roads and hedgerows and make them come in, so that my house may be full! ²⁴ Let me tell you this: none of those people who were invited will get to taste my dinner.’ ”

Once, many years ago, I preached a sermon on this passage. I emphasized the extraordinary way in which Jesus tells his hearers to do something that must have been as puzzling then as it is now. Don’t invite friends, relatives and neighbours to dinner—invite the poor and the disabled. The sermon had a strange effect. In the course of the next week my wife and I received dinner invitations from no fewer than three people who had been in church that day. Which category of guest we came into we were too polite—or anxious—to ask.

This time it looks as if the passage is real advice. The **parable** of the supper, which follows, is a parable all right, but Jesus really seems to have intended his hearers to take literally his radical suggestion about who to invite to dinner parties. Social conditions have changed, of course, and in many parts of the world, where people no longer live in small villages in which everyone knows everyone else’s business, where meals are eaten with the doors open and people wander to and fro at will (see 7:36–50), it may seem harder to put it into practice. Many Christians would have to try quite hard to find poor and disabled people to invite to a party—though I know some who do just that. Nobody can use the difference in circumstances as an excuse for ignoring the sharp edge of Jesus’ demand.

In particular, they cannot ignore it in the light of the parable. The story is, obviously, about people who very rudely snub the invitation to a splendid party. They make excuses of the usual kind. The householder, having gone to all the trouble of organizing and paying for a lavish feast, is determined to have guests at his table, even if he has to find them in unconventional locations. The original guests have ruled themselves out, and others have come in to take their place.

The first level of meaning of this parable should be clear. Jesus has been going around Galilee summoning people to God's great supper. This is the moment Israel has been waiting for! At last the time has arrived; those who were invited long ago must hurry up now and come! But most of them have refused, giving all kinds of reasons; we are reminded of the parable of the seeds and soils, in which various things caused most of the seeds to remain unfruitful. But some people have been delighted to be included: the poor, the disadvantaged, the disabled. They have come in and celebrated with Jesus.

The second level, as with the previous parable, is what this might mean for Luke in particular. Once again the expected guests are the Jews, waiting and waiting for the **kingdom**, only to find, when it arrived, that they had more pressing things to occupy them. Of course, in Luke's day many Jews had become Christians. The detail of the parable can't be forced at this point: it isn't true, at this level, that 'none of those who were invited shall taste my banquet,' since clearly many Jews were part of Jesus' kingdom-movement from the beginning. But the majority of the nation, both in Palestine and in the scattered Jewish communities in the rest of the world, were not. Instead, as it must have seemed to those first Jewish Christians, God's messengers had gone out into the roads and hedgerows of the world, getting all kinds of unexpected people to join in the party—not just **Gentiles**, but people with every kind of moral and immoral background, people quite different from them culturally, socially, ethnically and ethically.

But there is a third twist to this parable, in which it bends back, as it were, on itself, returning to the challenge which Jesus gave in verses 12–14. The party to which the original guests were invited was Jesus' kingdom-movement, his remarkable welcome to all and sundry. If people wanted to be included in Jesus' movement, this is the sort of thing they were joining.

Once again, therefore, the challenge comes to us today. Christians, reading this anywhere in the world, must work out in their own churches and families what it would mean to celebrate God's kingdom so that the people at the bottom of the pile, at the end of the line, would find it to be **good news**. It isn't enough to say that we ourselves are the people dragged in from the country lanes, to our surprise, to enjoy God's party. That may be true; but party guests are then expected to become party hosts in their turn.

LUKE 14:25–35

The Cost of Discipleship

²⁵ A large crowd was gathering around him. Jesus turned to face them.

²⁶ ‘If any of you come to me,’ he said to them, ‘and don’t hate your father and your mother, your wife and your children, your brothers and your sisters—yes, and even your own life!—you can’t be my disciple. ²⁷ If you don’t pick up your own cross and come after me, you can’t be my disciple.

²⁸ ‘Don’t you see? Supposing one of you wants to build a tower; what will you do? You will first of all sit down and work out how much it will cost, to see whether you have enough to finish it. ²⁹ Otherwise, when you’ve laid the foundation and then can’t finish it, everyone who sees it will begin to make fun of you. ³⁰ “Here’s a fellow”, they’ll say, “who began to build but couldn’t finish!”

³¹ ‘Or think of a king, on the way to fight a war against another king. What will he do? He will first sit down and discuss with his advisers whether, with ten thousand troops, he is going to be a match for the other side who are coming with twenty thousand! ³² If they decide he isn’t, he will send a delegation, while the other one is still a long way away, and sue for peace.

³³ ‘In the same way, none of you can be my disciple unless you give up all your possessions.

³⁴ ‘Salt is good; but if the salt loses its savour, how can it be made salty again? ³⁵ It’s no good for soil and no good for manure. People throw it away. If you have ears, then listen!’

Imagine a politician standing on a soap-box addressing a crowd. ‘If you’re going to vote for me,’ he says, ‘you’re voting to lose your homes and families; you’re asking for higher taxes and lower wages; you’re deciding in favour of losing all you love best! So come on—who’s on my side?’ The crowd wouldn’t even bother heckling him, or throwing rotten tomatoes at him. They would just be puzzled. Why on earth would anyone try to advertise himself in that way?

But isn’t that what Jesus is doing in this astonishing passage? ‘Want to be my disciple, do you? Well, in that case you have to learn to hate your family, give up your possessions, and get ready for a nasty death!’ Hardly the way, as we say, to win friends and influence people.

But wait a minute. Supposing, instead of a politician, we think of the leader of a great expedition, forging a way through a high and dangerous mountain pass to bring urgent medical aid to villagers cut off from the rest of the world. ‘If you want to come any further,’ the leader says, ‘you’ll have to leave your packs behind. From here on the path is too steep to carry all that stuff. You probably won’t find it again. And you’d better send your last postcards home; this is a dangerous route and it’s very likely that several of us won’t make it back.’ We can understand that. We may not like the sound of it, but we can see why it would make sense.

And we can see, therefore, that Jesus is more like the second person than the first. Since Christianity has often, quite rightly, been associated with what are called ‘family values’, it comes as a shock to be told to ‘hate’ your parents, wife and children, and siblings; but when the instruction goes one step further, that one must hate one’s own self, and be prepared for shameful death (‘take up your cross’ wasn’t simply a figure of speech in Jesus’ world!), then we begin to see what’s going on. Jesus is not denying the importance of close family, and the propriety of living in supportive harmony with them. But when there is an urgent task to be done, as there now is, then everything else, including one’s own **life**, must be put at risk for the sake of the **kingdom**.

The same is true of possessions. Many of Jesus' followers, then and now, have owned houses and lands, and have not felt compelled to abandon them. But being prepared to do so is the sign that one has understood the seriousness of the call to follow Jesus. Any of us, at any time, might be summoned to give up everything quite literally and respond to a new emergency situation. If we're not ready for that, we are like the tower-builder or warmonger who haven't thought through what they are really about.

These two pictures, the tower and the battle, themselves carried a cryptic warning in Jesus' day. The most important building project of his time was of course the **Temple** in Jerusalem: Herod the Great had begun a massive programme of rebuilding and beautifying it, and his sons and heirs were carrying on the work. But what was it all for? Would it ever be completed? Jesus has already warned that God had abandoned his house (13:35); Herod's Temple would shortly be left a smouldering ruin, its folly plain for all to see.

This is not unconnected to the second warning. If Jesus' contemporaries had fighting in mind, the chief enemy against whom they were longing to go to war was Rome. They probably only had a vague idea of who exactly the Romans were and what sort of forces they had at their command; otherwise, long before they came to blows, they would have taken the wise course and found a way to peace. But Jesus' warnings, and his urgings towards peace, were falling on deaf ears. His listeners, too concerned to hang on to their ancestral possessions, were eager for a war that would set them and their land free at last. Jesus was confronting them with a true emergency, and they were unable to see it and respond appropriately.

The last warning, therefore, comes with renewed force. Israel is supposed to be the salt of the earth, the people through whom God's world is kept wholesome and made tasty. But if Israel loses her particular ability and flavour, what is left? The warning backs up the cryptic sayings about the tower and the battle, and brings us back to the all-or-nothing challenge. Jesus is facing his contemporaries with a moment of crisis in which they must either be Israel indeed, through following him, or they must face the ruin of the tower and the devastation of the lost battle.

It is not difficult, and Luke may already have had this in mind, to re-apply these hard sayings to the ongoing life of the church. At every stage of its life the church has faced the challenge, not only of living up to Jesus' demands, but of placing them before the world. Where are the towers, and where are the wars, that our world is hell-bent on building and fighting? How can we summon the human race once more to costly obedience?¹

¹ Tom Wright, [*Luke for Everyone*](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 147–182.