

Luke 14:12-24 A welcome to all to come in

Introduction

How many of us had watched the Paralympics before the Beijing Olympics in 2008? I suspect very few indeed as the television coverage was minimal and in general terms the majority of the British public, like people in other countries, had simply chosen to be interested in other things. There had been Special Olympics of various kinds within this country for some years. In my previous church we had a number of people with disabilities –although we didn't actually think of them in that way –we knew them by name and took it for granted that there were some within the church family with special needs of various kinds. Several of them won medals, one or two had quite a collection of them and they were duly celebrated the Sunday after they returned home victorious. One young man who was a good runner invited members of the church to join him in some of his training. I remember joining him on some laps of the track as others from the church that day cheered him on. However, the step up to top level Paralympic sport is a big one, like that for their able-bodied colleagues. Anyone who has been watching the athletics at the London Olympics will have been aware of the extraordinary accomplishments of Oscar Pistorius, the double amputee from South Africa, who managed to get to the semi-finals of the 400 metres and was a member of the 4 x 400 metres relay team for South Africa.

How do we view Pistorius' participation in competition with able-bodied competitors? How do we view the millions of pounds spent on preparations for the Paralympic Games? If you have followed to any degree the discussions in the media it is fair to say that reactions have been decidedly mixed. Yet no-one can deny that Pistorius secured his place in sporting history by becoming the first double amputee to compete at the Olympics. He will be back in a few weeks to add to his haul of Paralympic titles, but the impact of the 95 seconds or so he spent in competitive action will reverberate longer in the sport than anything he achieves next month. Pistorius fought for the right to compete against able-bodied athletes, pursuing the IAAF to the Court of Arbitration for Sport after it ruled that his blades offered an advantage over able-bodied rivals. The notion that a man without legs could have an edge over his able-bodied rivals seems like an affront to common sense, but Pistorius challenges preconceptions on many levels. He has long been accepted by his rivals. Kirani James of Grenada, the reigning world 400m champion who finished first ahead of Pistorius, demonstrated his respect for the South African by making a point of swapping numbers with him after the race (*Daily Telegraph*, 6 August 2012). It is possible, in time, that technology will raise questions about the meaning of fair and equal competition, but not at the moment. What this young South African has accomplished is truly remarkable –though he is not the first disabled competitor to gain entry to the Olympics –Neroli Fairhall of New Zealand had that honour, representing New Zealand in archery at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles. She had been paralysed from the waist down after a motorcycle accident, and competed from her wheel-chair in a variety of sports. But what about the Paralympics in general? There have been many unkind comments on on-line debates on the BBC sport website with some people holding very questionable views with respect to the place of people with additional needs in our society. Yet the fact that the tickets have almost sold out for the first time for the Paralympics is a testimony to the perspective held by the vast majority of people in the United Kingdom. This is good news as Jesus welcomed all people to come to Him, in the context of a society that shunned the disabled and kept them hidden out of sight –as still happens in some countries today. Let's look briefly at Luke 14:12-24 and reflect on Jesus' and the Bible's perspective on this subject, as it is important for our view of other people not just those who are good at sport.

1. God's big welcome to people of all backgrounds without exception (Isaiah 25:6-9)

The Old Testament image of the Gospel invitation as a feast was familiar to Jesus' hearers. It was a vision not just of righteous Jews participating in God's feast, but accompanied by righteous Gentiles (anyone who is not a Jew). It was a vision that would complement the vision of heaven John had in Revelation 7:9-10: *After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.*¹⁰ *And they cried out in a loud voice: Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.* Notice the emphasis in Isaiah's vision as described in Isaiah 25:6-9: *⁶On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. ⁷ On this mountain He will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; ⁸ He will swallow up death for ever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; He will remove the disgrace of His people from all the earth. The Lord has spoken. ⁹In that day they will say, Surely this is our God; we trusted in Him, and He saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in Him; let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation.* In eastern culture to have a meal with someone was a declaration not merely of friendship, but almost an acceptance of that person as if they were a member of your immediate family circle.

God's vision is so much greater than just the chosen people of Jewish ethnic origins declaring their faith in Him; He wants the glory and honour from the praises and adoration of people from every background in every corner of the globe. God desires fellowship with believers of all social and ethnic origins. *The shroud or sheet*, mentioned in Isaiah 25:7 refers to the curse of death, that one day God would destroy its curse. Paul in I Corinthians 15:12-57 explains how in the death and resurrection of Jesus this victory was accomplished. These words of Isaiah could not have been stressed more clearly: *all peoples, all nations, all faces, from all the earth.* When these people own Him as Saviour and Lord there is great rejoicing and blessing. Revelation 21:3-4 reflects Isaiah 25:8 in speaking of the ultimate victory of God in Jesus. *And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.* Praise God for such blessings.

However, many Jews in the Post-exilic period (the five centuries before Jesus' birth) were so concerned to avoid impure idolatrous Gentiles that they toned down the radical teaching of the Old Testament to teach something very different to what God had said. An Aramaic language paraphrase of Isaiah 25:6-9 renders the first part of this text in this way: *The Lord of Hosts will make for all the peoples on this mountain a feast and a festival They shall consider it for honour, but it shall be shame for them, even plagues which they cannot escape, plagues wherein they shall perish* [J.N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, Vol.1, p.463]. In fact this was the very opposite of what Isaiah's message from God declares. Other Jewish works from the Post-exilic period prior to the coming of Jesus also had no time for the Gentiles. In the century before Jesus' time on earth the Qumran monastic community took this vision one step further, not only were Gentiles excluded from the heavenly banquet, but also imperfect Jews, including anyone who is 'smitten in his flesh, or paralyzed in his feet or hands, or lame, or blind, or deaf, or dumb, or smitten in his flesh with a visible blemish' [K. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, pp.90-91]. The Pharisees present at the meal described in Luke 14 would probably have been familiar with these views. It is possible that they might even have agreed with them. When we read Luke 14:1-24 in the light of such knowledge, it is clear that Jesus affirms the vision proclaimed by Isaiah and offers a strong criticism of this restrictive view of God and the Gospel proclaimed by some of the Jews of His day.

2. God's view of the human beings He created

In the book of Genesis there is a remarkable description of our significance as human beings in the created order. *Then God said, 'Let Us make mankind in Our image, in Our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'*²⁷ So God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them (Genesis 1:26-27). These words are true equally of every person born on this earth. Each is a person of worth and value –this is profoundly important for our lives from conception to the grave. It impinges on our view of children in the womb. If we consider a woman is carrying someone created in God's image then our attitude to abortion will be very different to the person who thinks they have the right to save or take the child's life. Psalm 139:13-16 records some remarkable words of David: *For You created my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother's womb. ¹⁴I praise You because I am fearfully and wonderfully made Your works are wonderful, I know that full well. ¹⁵My frame was not hidden from You when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth; ¹⁶Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be.* Likewise, an elderly person or someone terminally ill should not have their care rationed so that they pass on quickly; as people created in the image of God they are entitled to the best care we can provide as a society in their latter days. Our Bible verse for the year in 2010 was one precious to many of us from Jeremiah 29:11: *For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.* These words are true for all of us and that quality of life implied in these words applies equally, regardless of colour or class, able-bodied or disabled and in whichever geographical region of the world we live. Therefore, we welcome the progress made in the care for and provision of services for people with disabilities in our society. Yet we recognise that both at home and especially in some other countries even more progress needs to happen. The *Undeclared* initiative, a campaign to encourage the Government to give greater assistance to people with disabilities, in which the Baptist Missionary Society is playing a part, is something which we can support as Christians.

3. God's invitation to share in His Kingdom (Luke 14:12-14)

¹²*Then Jesus said to his host, 'When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'* The context of this message was an exclusive party for individuals who had the right credentials to attend this prominent Pharisee's feast. It was the equivalent to a Celebrity party today at which the guests want to be seen wearing appropriate clothes and having the right place at the function. In less sophisticated times the fuss was simply over the seating plan, but Jesus was horrified at the attitudes on display. It could not have been further from God's view of people and the value on the life of each individual. Jesus wanted to redirect the thinking of His host and the other guests. He urged them to change their whole way of life, from focussing on being seen and honoured by the 'in' crowd to reaching out to people in need who could really use some help, but had been ignored. The challenge in any society today is this: are there any groups of people who are being overlooked in our community? Jesus gave quite a list of categories of people in that society. *But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴and you will be blessed* (Luke 14:13). This would have gone down like the proverbial lead balloon in a society where the sight of deep poverty or

disability was viewed as a punishment for sin either by the individual or within that family circle. This mindset even afflicted the disciples of Jesus. This is revealed by the question they asked Jesus in John 9:1-3a: *As He went along, He saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, **who sinned**, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’³ ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ said Jesus.* This negative view of disabled people, sadly still found in various countries today, can have serious implication on the quality of life both they and their families can experience. Jesus made a deliberate point here in challenging the prejudice against disabled people. There may not be many votes in it for politicians in assisting people on the margins. I came across that in a political context when I asked some key politicians if there was a chance that a number of empty flats in a particular geographical location could be used to house asylum seekers. The silence and then nervous responses from otherwise eloquent and gifted individuals revealed that my suggestion was unlikely to increase their vote at the next election. Over the centuries Christians have been very prominent in reaching out to the disadvantaged, not just opposing slavery and a small number of open evils in our society. Behind these campaigns was a clear recognition of the worth of the lives of each person; and this enabled campaigners to persevere –for years – until the cause was successful. This reminds us in our mission at home and overseas to ensure we don’t neglect the people who need our assistance.

4. **God can turn obstacles into opportunities** (Luke 14:15-24)

(a) **The Problem of Procrastination** (Luke 14:15)¹⁵ *When one of those at the table with Him heard this, he said to Jesus, ‘Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.’ Won’t it be wonderful in heaven that all will be equal and what Jesus has just proposed becomes the reality? Yes, that will be wonderful, but it does not mean that we should not take action in the here and now. God wants His people to take a lead in making this world a setting that is closer to the one He envisaged for our lives when the world was created. It will always be imperfect, but in small steps and with individuals we can improve the quality of their lives by Christ-like actions and consideration. The current context of the Paralympics and the celebration of the accomplishments of those who have overcome sometimes great adversity is right and proper, but many disabled or disadvantaged people need a hand to do less prominent things. In many countries they still need adequate ramps to access public buildings or the adaptation of buses and trains and taxis to enable them to travel to carry out their normal business. Although our country has made major strides in recent years in these matters many others have barely begun to address these concerns. I had the privilege some years ago to visit a newly-opened residential centre and school for people with special needs. It was an attractive facility and the children present made us most welcome. Yet within a few minutes I sensed that something was not right; there were plenty of stairs but no lifts in the only centre for people with special needs in that region of that European country. I should have had the courage to ask the staff what provision had been made for wheelchair users or other with mobility issues. We should not leave to someone else what we can do to be rightly inclusive in our welcome in both the church and wider community.*

(b) **The problem of priorities** (Luke 14:16-24) 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 have 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 compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. ²⁴I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.”* The excuses given in the story of Jesus were deliberately ludicrous and nonsensical. They would have provoked laughter from the audience at first as they envisaged a man saying that he could not come to a wedding or special banquet –because he had bought and field and urgently needed to see it! No-one in that culture bought a field without endless on-site visits and haggling over the price. Another alleged had bought five teams of oxen and needed to plough as field –to see if they could do the job for which he had purchased them! Again sales of oxen were announced well ahead of time. In the set day the owner would demonstrate how his animals could accomplish this task before inviting bids for their purchase –or even the opportunity for a prospective purchaser to have a go himself with the animals in the field. No-one would do what this alleged person proposed doing rather than attend the function. The absurdity of the excuses reaches its crescendo in the excuse about getting married. Yes I had planned to come to your party, but I had forgotten I was getting married that week –in the days before holidays or honeymoons were invented the man is at home having got married, presumably with his wife. It would be the obvious occasion to show off his beautiful bride to anyone who had not met her! I suspect the laughter was laced with a degree of nervousness as they awaited Jesus’ point here. The master of the feast then instructed his servants to invite the people no-one would have had on a guest list 2,000 years ago in that society. *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 (Luke 14:21).* They did, but something we could easily miss was recorded by Luke in Luke 14:22: *“Sir,” the servant said, “what you ordered has been done, **but there is still room.*** Treating the people with special needs fairly as a country, including the financial investment to provide the facilities and other resources they need for a good quality of life will not empty the treasury for the rest of the community. Some of the posters in the last couple of weeks on the BBC website I viewed suggested that less money should have been spent on the Paralympics, instead giving it for the less-well funded sports for able-bodied sportsmen and women. Jesus would have disagreed and so must we! Here in this story for people with disabilities and in Luke 15:11-32 for people on the margins, like the prodigal son, God gives an invitation to fellowship and celebration with Him *so that my house will be full* (Luke 14:23b) In the words of Mark Owen, Church Life secretary of the Baptist Union of Wales: The heart of God is for a full house! So He loves to party and clearly everyone is invited. Not on the grounds of wealth or ability, status or upbringing. Not because they were the elite or successful. Indeed Luke tells us in chapter 15 that there’s a party in heaven every time someone comes to know and accept Jesus as their Saviour and Lord (Luke 15: 10). The imagery here is that the master’s house is a place of invitation and welcome where, without prejudice and without discrimination, the uncompromising love of God is portrayed. What a wonderful imagery of what it is to be Church!

Some years ago, Mark Owen stated, he read of an alligator attack on a little boy who’d gone swimming. His mother witnessed the terrifying events unfold and spoke of how, in utter fear, she ran toward the water yelling to her son as loudly as she could. From the shore’s edge, the mother grabbed her little boy by the arms just as the alligator snatched his legs. Then began an incredible tug-of-war between the two. The alligator was much stronger than the mother, but the mother was much too passionate to let go. A passer-by heard her screams, and the alligator was shot. Remarkably, after weeks and weeks in the hospital, the little boy survived. The newspaper reporter, who interviewed the boy after the trauma, asked if he would show him his scarred legs. They were horrific. But then, with obvious pride, he said to the reporter, “But look at my arms. I have

great scars on my arms, too. I have them because my mum wouldn't let go." When Thomas was challenged by the other disciples that Jesus had been raised from the dead his response was "Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe it" (John 20: 25). And a week later as Jesus comes again and stands among His disciples His challenge to Thomas is: "See My hands ... reach out your hand and put it into My side". This same Jesus still bears the marks in His body as He now lives and reigns in heaven. As John Swinton [Aberdeen University theology professor] writes, "If perfection and the life of heaven is marked by what culture teaches us is 'perfection', then why does Jesus still carry his wounds?" These are the scars that speak of sacrifice - that cry aloud, 'undefeated champion'" [BMS *Undefeated* resources citation]. We must encourage everyone to be whom God desires them to be in Christ, using the gifts and abilities entrusted to them, for Jesus' sake, Amen