



*The second cup...*

## Sermon notes

This year's theme and scripture passage

This year's MHA Sunday service focuses on the issue of loneliness. At MHA, we see loneliness as an issue of justice – loneliness doesn't just happen but becomes an issue wherever people face marginalisation or exclusion.

This contrasts with the picture of God's kingdom painted in this year's scripture passage – Luke 14:15-23 (the parable of the banquet). Here we see an image of everyone being welcomed in together, especially those who are usually on the edges.

### Some statistics

You may find it helpful to include some statistics within your sermon (there are also some at the end of the video if you will be showing this during your service). During the period from October 2023 to March 2024, approximately 3.1 million people in England reported that they felt lonely often or always. Risk factors that can lead to loneliness tend to increase and converge as we get older – key factors associated with older age include:

- Facing bereavement
- Living alone
- Living with limiting disabilities or illnesses
- Caring for a partner
- Physical and mental health difficulties
- Low fixed incomes (e.g. pensions) making activities unaffordable
- Digital exclusion
- Reduced mobility

According to Age UK older people living in England are 5.5 times more likely to be lonely if they don't have someone to open up to when they need to, 5.2 times more likely to be often lonely if they are widowed and 3.7 times more likely to be often lonely if they are in poor health.

Linking the theme to MHA's work in your local area

The video and befriending case study script (which is provided as an alternative if you

---

<sup>1</sup> Community Life Survey 2023/24 – Department for Culture, Media and Support

<sup>2</sup> Age UK "All the Lonely People: Loneliness in later life (2018)

don't have facilities to play the video) shows how MHA's Befriending services around the country tackle the issue of loneliness. We know that many churches do similar work – as a national charity, MHA is able to work with you to begin to tackle the enormous scale of the problem nationwide. But befriending is just one of the ways that MHA works. Our communities services also run a whole range of activities and clubs, which bring older people together and help them to make connections within their communities. Our Retirement Living Schemes and Care Homes create community, supported by the work of our chaplains across all these homes and schemes. Can you bring the story of a real individual from your local area at MHA into your sermon to illustrate the impact that reducing loneliness can have? If you would like help with this, reach out to your local chaplain, or contact our central team at [chaplaincy@mha.org.uk](mailto:chaplaincy@mha.org.uk).

### **Call to action**

At the end of your sermon, you might include a call to action to help the congregation understand how they can support the work of MHA. Remember that this is not just about giving financial donations (although of course those are vital to sustaining our work and much appreciated!) People can also join with MHA in this work by praying for us, and also by volunteering their time at a local home or scheme, as a telephone befriender or as a link person between your circuit and MHA if you don't already have one – we call these “circuit reps”.

## *Fully worked sermon:*

Jesus tells a story at a dinner party where everyone watching him knows exactly who should be there, and exactly who should not.

And then he tells a story that quietly offends every assumption in the room.

At first, it sounds like a story about hospitality. About a generous host and a great banquet. Then, just as the listeners are beginning to imagine packed tables, and overflowing cups it becomes clear that this is not a comforting story at all. It is a story that unsettles the people listening, because it exposes the invisible rules by which they live.

Who gets invited. Who is expected. Who is overlooked.

Jesus tells this story in a place where everyone believes the table already makes sense. And he tells it precisely to show them that it does not.

In the story, the invitations are sent out. The food is prepared. The table is laid. And then the excuses begin.

One person has property to attend to. Another has business commitments. Another simply has other priorities.

None of these excuses are shocking.

The problem is not hostility. It is distraction. Comfort. Busyness.

And the host is angry. Not because his pride is wounded, but because he refuses to accept an empty table.

In this story, absence is the scandal.

The banquet has been prepared for people, and when the expected guests will not come, the invitation goes wider. The host sends his servants out again, first into the streets and lanes of the town, and then even further, until the table is full.

In this story, absence is never treated as normal.

This is where the parable turns towards us.

Because the question it raises isn't simply, "Who is welcome in God's kingdom?" It's, "Who is missing?"

And more uncomfortably, "Whose absence have we learned to accept?"

In Jesus' world, there were people who were routinely left out. The poor. The disabled. Those who did not fit the social or religious expectations of the time. Their absence from the table was normalised.

Jesus refuses to accept that normal.

Absence is rarely accidental. It is shaped by loss, exclusion, and neglect, as people are quietly pushed to the edges.

When people disappear from our shared life without anyone noticing, something has already gone wrong.

The kingdom of God is not simply about gathering those who already belong. It is about noticing who is not there, and refusing to let that absence be the end of the story

In every era, there are absences that are easy to explain away. People we stop expecting to see. People whose disappearance feels almost natural.

In our own time, one of the most normalised absences is the loneliness of people in later life.

Loneliness in later life is rarely dramatic. It grows through bereavement, declining health, reduced mobility, limited income, and shrinking confidence.

In England today, over three million people say they feel lonely often or always. That is not a marginal issue. It is a quiet reality for millions of lives lived largely out of sight.

But loneliness is not, at heart, a statistic.

It is the experience of days without meaningful conversation. Of being known once, and no longer. Of sensing that your presence or absence would make little difference. And that is why loneliness is a matter of justice.

The most important thing about the parable is not who refuses the invitation.

It is what the host does next.

He does not cancel the banquet. He does not lower his expectations. He does not accept that this is simply how things are.

He sends his servants out.

First into the streets and lanes of the town. Then further still, beyond the usual boundaries, until the table is full.

It's an active, deliberate, and persistent welcome. God does not wait for people to find their way in. God goes looking.

The kingdom of God advances not by accident, but by invitation.

And notice this: the servants are not asked to judge who deserves a place. They are sent to make room.

It's the turning point in the story.

The problem of loneliness and exclusion is not met with explanation or sympathy alone, but with movement. With action. With people willing to be sent.

God's response to empty seats is not resignation. It is commissioning. God's hospitality continues wherever someone is willing to pour a second cup. At this table there is the cup set before us, and the cup we choose to share.

This is where the story meets our own time.

In the parable, the servants are sent out to make the invitation real. They bring the promise of the banquet to those who had assumed it was not meant for them.

That is where MHA stands in this story as one way the Methodist Church responds to this commissioning of God.

Across our care homes, retirement living schemes, and community services, MHA works to create community where isolation has taken hold, and connection where loneliness has become normal.

One expression of this is our befriending service.

Through regular phone calls and visits, volunteers offer something that sounds small, but is anything but: presence. Attention. Relationship.

One person who receives befriending through MHA put it like this:

"I love the calls from my volunteer. We hit it off from the very start. She's given me confidence to go out again and meet my friend for coffee once a week. I look forward to the calls, and so does she."

That is not just companionship. That is dignity being restored. A life widening again.

Alongside this, MHA's chaplains work day by day in care homes and retirement living schemes, offering pastoral presence, noticing who is struggling, and helping to ensure that no one is left unseen at the edges of community life.

It is the servant stepping out again, saying: there is room at the table.

And the story slows down there.

With servants moving through streets and lanes, carrying an invitation that feels almost too generous to be true. With a table filling slowly, unevenly, unexpectedly.

The banquet does not fill itself.  
It fills because the invitation keeps being carried.

And that raises a question the parable never answers directly.

Not whether the invitation is generous. But how it continues to be offered.

Sending servants costs something. Time. Energy. Commitment. Provision.

A banquet that keeps its doors open must be sustained.

The measure of this banquet is not the beauty of the host's intention, but whether the invitation keeps reaching those who have not yet heard.

This is where the work of MHA belongs.

Not outside the story, but within it.

Befriending, chaplaincy, community life – these are not side projects. They are ways the invitation continues to be carried to people who would otherwise remain unseen.

But like every act of sending, this work relies on shared commitment.

For some, responding to this invitation will mean becoming a volunteer with MHA's befriending service, continuing to say to people in later life: you matter, and you have a place in this world.

Some do this by praying – holding before God those who feel lonely, and those who go out week by week carrying the invitation.

And some do this by giving financially as a way of ensuring that the invitation keeps being offered, and that the table remains open to those who have stopped expecting a place.

The banquet in Jesus' parable does not end with perfection.  
It ends with fullness.

A table crowded with unexpected guests.  
People who did not expect to be there, discovering that the invitation was real after all.

This is the vision of the kingdom  
Jesus offers.  
Not a community formed by similarity, but by welcome.  
Not a gathering defined by status,

but by grace.  
At this table, there are two cups.  
The cup poured for us.

And the cup that says:  
there is room at this table for you too.

May we be people willing to share that second cup.  
Willing to pray, to give, and to serve, so that the invitation keeps being offered.

And somewhere, even now, someone who has stopped expecting an invitation is waiting  
to hear that it is true.

Let us be people who help carry  
that invitation.

**Amen.**



*make it matter*