

I would like to set you a little moral dilemma.

It was Amanda's birthday. Her husband loved her so much he wanted to get her something special, something different, something that would really show her how much he cared. He wanted something that he felt reflected her nature, her kindness and enthusiasm. He knew she liked dogs, so he bought her a puppy!

There was only one flaw in this plan. Amanda didn't want a puppy. She didn't want puddles on the floor, walks in the rain, having to get home at regular times, having another whole set of responsibilities. But, Amanda loved her husband and didn't want to disappoint him. So she wondered what on earth she should do. Should she:

- (a) Keep the puppy and spend time training it so that she ended up with a dog she could enjoy
- (b) send the puppy back so that someone who might be a more responsible owner could take care of it.
- (c) Keep the puppy but tell her husband that he has to look after it.
- (d) Keep the puppy and fail to look after it.

It is obvious to all of us that the last option should never be taken, but we might be divided in our opinions about the other three possible outcomes.

We are faced with this kind of dilemma the whole time. Someone offers you a cake they have baked specially for your visit, but you are on a diet. Someone invites you to give a lecture, but you have theatre tickets for that night. In the end we have to decide how much we care about hurting the other person, and also about who or what else gets damaged, be it our relationships, our work prospects, our physical or mental health, or our environment.

In the scenario of the puppy, the balance is completely changed if Amanda is told that the puppy will probably face destruction if she does not accept it. Then she has an even harder, some might say impossible, choice.

This is the choice that we have, a choice that is described in the parable of the banquet.

We are invited to participate in God's kingdom, which, according to the teaching of Jesus, is not just about the after life, some pastel coloured version of heaven where the beautiful people have banquets, but about the eternal presence of God's love which we understand through and in creation. This is literally the invitation of a lifetime. We didn't ask for this but, nevertheless, it has

been given to us. Acceptance means responsibility. Huge responsibility. It requires us to care for all creation, all God's people. But actually, it is much easier not to do that, to have the freedom to be selfish, to look after our own interests and the interests of those closest to us. What a choice!

Refusal hurts the giver. When we reject the gift, we knowingly or unknowingly reject the giver. Ultimately, our decision whether to accept or not rests not only upon our pleasure or displeasure at the gift, but also upon our love for the giver. How much do we love God? How much are we prepared to accept the responsibility of caring for this gift? What happens if we reject the gift or accept it, and use it, but fail to take responsibility for it?

These are difficult questions, and what we mostly do is evade them. We put the invitation on the mantelpiece and say to ourselves we will answer that later. In the meantime we will get on with the business of our lives. Much of Jesus's teaching is about saying 'Don't do this. Don't leave it too late. You need to answer now'.

But how?

What would it actually mean to reject the gift? How can we not participate in the world, not accept and give love? To reject the gift is suicide. Very few people who commit suicide are actively rejecting the gift of the world, the gift of life. All too often it is seen as a (albeit misguided) way of helping those they love. No, we rarely totally reject the gift. What we do, which is far worse, is accept it and abuse it. The one option that Amanda could not take – keeping the puppy and failing to look after it.

The issues of injustice and poverty in the world are many and various. Individually we cannot stop torture, eliminate malaria, prevent deforestation, halt global warming, sustain agriculture in Southern Sudan, challenge the arms dealers, destroy the drug trade, solve the problem of overpopulation or tackle any of the other major problems that beset the world. But that is not an excuse for doing nothing.

We must not be the people who failed to put on the wedding clothes, the ones who refused to accept their responsibilities as guests.

We have been given the gift of God's kingdom, the gift of creation, the gift of love. We cannot sit back and let things happen around us, we have to get involved. What that means will vary from person to person. It could mean including a charity in your will, it could mean writing letters to companies that sell plants taken from the forests, it could mean volunteering for a wildlife trust or a hostel for the homeless, it could mean walking rather than taking the car, it could mean so many things, but one thing is certain, it would mean thinking about the consequences of everything we do.

Why would we do this rather than simply look after ourselves? We come back, as we so often do when studying scripture, to the central question of all: How much do we love God? That in turn leads us to the great commandments: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. And the second is like, namely this, you shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets'.

Amen.