

Come and Eat 3

Prayer and Parties

What's your favourite summary for the life of the Church? One of mine is prayer and parties. It's a line much loved by Bishop Jack Nichols, my predecessor as Bishop of Sheffield: best said in a soft Lancashire accent. I had it quoted back to me many times and actually grew to love it. We need both prayer and parties just at this moment as we move from lament to languishing and back to life and as we begin to meet again in person in our churches and to gather around the table of the Lord.

Jesus loves parties. Everyone who reads the gospel knows that. There's lots of eating and drinking: in the home of Mary and Martha; at the wedding in Cana; at the house of Simon the Pharisee. There are lots of stories about eating and drinking: the people Jesus talks about are always throwing parties. In Luke 15 alone there are three celebrations when what was lost is found. The woman who finds the lost coin throws a big party for her neighbours; the man who loses a sheep calls his neighbours to rejoice. The father in the story of the two sons kills the fatted calf; there is feasting and music and dancing. Jesus enjoys prayer and parties.

So welcome to the third podcast in this short series Come and Eat as we explore the meaning of Holy Communion. We are reflecting together on the wonderful invitation Jesus gives in John 21, where he prepares breakfast to the disciples and invites them to sit and eat. In Part 1, we thought of the Eucharist as a meal given to restore us as God restores Elijah after his great trial and for his journey through the desert. There is grace here. God comes to meet us.

In Part 2, we focussed on the Eucharist as a meal where we look back and remember, as families often do when we gather around the table for a birthday or anniversary. In the Eucharist we look back and remember the gift of manna in the wilderness, the Passover, the feeding miracles in the gospel and, of course, most of all the Last Supper. Jesus commands his church to do this in remembrance of him: to take bread and wine, to give thanks, to break the bread and pour the wine, and eat and drink to remember and make present his sacrifice on the cross and his resurrection from the dead.

Today, in Part 3, we're going to explore the Eucharist also as a meal, but which looks forward as well as back. The Eucharist recalls us to hope and especially the hope of God's kingdom and the great feast to which God invites us in heaven. Every Eucharist is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. In the final part, I hope we will reflect together on the ways in which Christ is present and meets us as we respond to this grace filled invitation to sit and eat together.

One of the things I'm looking forward to most as lockdown eases further is sitting down to eat with family and friends. We've been able to do a little already. I expect you have too. But now I'm preparing and cooking, ready for children and grandchildren to come and stay as soon as it's allowed. I'm looking forward to having a meal out in a pub with friends, which

will be the first for a long time. It will be a little while yet, but it will be a special moment when we can get the whole family together. Our eldest son proposed to his girlfriend a few weeks ago, and they are planning a wedding later this year. There's going to be a wonderful party.

I imagine the feeding of the five thousand felt like a party – or at the very least like an enormous picnic – a grand day out. But to really get a sense of how Jesus loved to party, you need to turn back a few pages, to the very first sign or miracle we are told about in John's gospel. You know the story. There is a wedding at Cana in Galilee. Jesus, his mother and the disciples are there. The wine runs out. Mary appeals to Jesus. Jesus tells the servants to fill up six enormous stone jars with water, then to draw the water out and take it to the master of the feast. The water has been changed to wine. The wine is of the very finest quality: 'you have saved the best till now'. The wine is provided in a massive quantity: 180 gallons, in abundance, overflowing, enough for a party which would last for days and days. Here is joy and celebration and love and life in all its fulness.

There is a lot going on at this wedding, and all of it connects to what is happening every time we go to church and gather around the table of the Lord.

More than 700 years before the birth of Jesus, Isaiah the prophet sang this beautiful song about God visiting his people:

"On this mountain the Lord of Hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well matured wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death for ever".

Isaiah's vision, echoed elsewhere in the prophets, is of a wonderful and glorious party, a banquet, with rich food and wine. Isaiah's vision is a universal vision – mark that well. This is not a banquet for one special nation only but a vision for all peoples. At this great and wonderful banquet for all the nations on earth, God will destroy the shroud of death for ever.

The miracles in the gospels which centre on food and drink are a partial fulfilment of this great prophecy of the heavenly banquet. God's kingdom is breaking into the life of the world in new ways in Jesus. But the miracles are signs of what is still to come, not the final word. The signs point us to the wonder and abundance and openness of the great invitation to the feast which is still to come. The signs encourage us with a vision and hope of God's kingdom and to live out that vision in our everyday lives and in the life of the church.

The Last Supper, too, is a foretaste of the kingdom and of the heavenly banquet. Jesus looks back to the Passover but also forward: "from now on, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes" (Luke 22.18).

And Jesus' gift of Holy Communion, his command to do this in remembrance of me, looks back to the Last Supper, but also forward to the great banquet in heaven. This looking forward is reflected in the words of the service:

“Send the Holy Spirit on your people and gather into one in your kingdom all who share this one bread and one cup” (Common Worship 190)

“So cleanse and feed us with the precious body and blood of your Son that he may live in us and we in him and that we with the whole company of Christ may sit and eat in your kingdom” (Common Worship 181)

“Gather your people from the ends of the earth to feast with all your saints at the table in your kingdom where the new creation is brought to perfection” (Common Worship 200)

“We come to this foretaste of your heavenly banquet to be transformed by your grace and restored in the image and likeness of the risen Christ” (Times and Seasons 518)

As we regather as a church around the table of the risen Lord, what are we to draw from this very significant theme in the Eucharist as a meal which looks forward, a sign of hope and of the kingdom? Reflect with me on three key strands of meaning.

The first is that the welcome and the invitation is for all the peoples of the earth, not just for some, and not just for people like us. The invitation to the banquet is for everyone without distinction. Christ’s purpose, according to Ephesians, is nothing less than the creation of one new humanity in which all divisions are abolished through the cross. Love bids us welcome but love bids all welcome equally. We are called to a radical hospitality of love, which is itself a sign of the kingdom of God. This meal is especially for the poor, the despised, the lost and the least.

Our services of Holy Communion are to be a sign of this heavenly banquet. The invitation must be open to all irrespective of age or gender or race or disability or sexuality or class or educational background.

There has been a great deal of conversation in the church in recent weeks about racism following the publication of the challenging report of the Archbishops’ Task Group. Some commentators have questioned the report as a kind of new political correctness. Nothing could be further from the truth. The equality of welcome to all irrespective of race is absolutely fundamental to the gospel. Racism is a sin. We must challenge that sin in ourselves and others and invite everyone to the table, taking the barriers down wherever we sense people feel excluded.

We will be spending time as a church later this year, nationally and locally, exploring the questions of human sexuality and discerning together prayerfully how best to live in love and faith together. Again, there will be some who argue that this is somehow unnecessary. But the need for this exploration flows from the fact that we are eucharistic church, called to gather around the table of the Lord, a sign and foretaste of the banquet in heaven.

My second strand of meaning is focussed around the world’s need for hope. The pandemic has left many of us and much of our world deeply shaken. The more the world becomes aware of the threat of climate change, as well as the ongoing pandemic, the more the fear

will grow. Honesty about the facts and risks is necessary as a spur to action. But all of these dangers need to be held in the perspective of hope.

The world is not yet as God calls the world to be. God's kingdom has come in part but not yet in all its fulness. We are called, as Christians, to work together for that day when God's kingdom will be revealed in all its fulness and glory, when we will feast at the table in heaven. As we gather around the table of the Lord, that hope is rekindled, Sunday by Sunday. We recover the perspective of our faith in the challenges of our time once more. We find strength to work for the coming of God's kingdom. There are some parties which are designed to blur our vision and numb our senses to the realities of what is happening around us. The Eucharist is not like that. The Eucharist is prayer and parties with a purpose: to fill us with hope and a fresh vision for what this world can become. This is the place where prophets are formed and where the world is changed.

My final strand is concerned with holding together joy and suffering. Ask yourself this question - why did Jesus, on the night before he died, have a party with his friends?

Our world is gripped by a fundamental misunderstanding of the relationship between joy and suffering. The world sees them as opposites – an either or. It seems impossible to hold them together.

But Christian faith – and the eucharist – enable us to do exactly that. Wine is the great symbol of joy and celebration in the Bible. That is why there is so much wine at the wedding in Cana. But wine at the Last Supper is also the symbol of Christ's love and passion and suffering for the sake of the world. In Christ, joy and suffering are therefore not alternatives. Christians know it is possible to find and to be surprised by joy even in the midst of the most difficult and challenging and testing times: because nothing we experience in this life is the end of the story. There is always something more and better and deeper unfolding.

Every Eucharist is an invitation to acknowledge the pain and suffering in the world as we remember the passion and death of Christ in bread which is broken and wine outpoured. But every Eucharist is also an invitation to rediscover joy as we remember that God raised Jesus from the dead and his life flows.

At the very centre of Christian faith, God has set a table - a feast. We come as we are to be sustained for the next part of the journey. We look back and we remember and find the centre of our faith again. We look forward to the great heavenly banquet, at which all will be equal, in hope and in joy and we sing out God's message to the world. Come and eat.

Amen.