

## HOLY COMMUNION, TABLE FELLOWSHIP, INVITATION AND ACCEPTANCE

Isaiah 55:1-5; Acts 11:1-14; Luke 19:1-10

20<sup>th</sup> March 2011, 8 a.m. and 10 a.m.

1. To invite someone to have a meal with you is a deeply ingrained social custom, embedded in the fabric of social interaction. It comes as second nature to us. Even children as young as pre-schoolers will ask their parents if they can invite a friend round for tea. And that holds true through to adulthood. If you want to develop a friendship, a natural way is to invite your friend for a meal.
2. By inviting someone for a meal, you are inviting them to share in your life at a deeper level than that of just a passing acquaintance. This is true of the first occasion when you invite your girlfriend or boyfriend to your home. It marks the next step in a developing relationship as they meet your family around the meal table, and become part of that circle.
3. This cultural custom is not simply limited to Western Society. I have experienced it firsthand in cultures around the world.
  - i) When I was living in a small village in Sri Lanka, it was a real privilege to be invited into people's homes along with the local clergyman with whom I was staying, and to share in their hospitality – perhaps eating the first rice that had been harvested from the family's paddy fields that season.
  - ii) In Hong Kong, eating with others is a huge part of social life. There are so many restaurants in Hong Kong, that in my three years there I could have eaten in a different restaurant for breakfast, lunch and supper every day, and still not visited them all. In Hong Kong the tables in restaurants are generally round, and this enhances the sense of togetherness. A very high value is placed upon entertaining people for meals. It's said that for those who are ex-patriates in Hong Kong, when you finally come to leave, you have to eat your way out, as so many colleagues and friends will want to dine with you.
  - iii) In 2007 I had the privilege of travelling around Tanzania as part of my sabbatical study-leave, visiting many village churches and communities and I found there also a very strong tradition of offering generous hospitality to your guests. I often travelled with the Bishop or one of the senior diocesan clergy. There would be a celebration service in the local church, and then we would be invited for a meal in the local pastor's home. The hospitality was incredibly generous, with plates piled high with food when you knew that most villagers had very little to eat, and bottles of Coke or Sprite on the table when they couldn't really afford that, and they had to walk long distances just to get water.
4. I have dwelt on this theme because I want to stress how important having meals with one another is. This is true not only for us in the present, across cultures, but it is also true across the centuries, going back to the time of Jesus. You could even say that much of Jesus' ministry was meal-centred. Just think of how many occasions the Gospels record Jesus

having meals with people. Indeed, one of the accusations levelled against Jesus by his opponents was that he was a glutton and a drunkard! (Luke 7:34) They must have observed the great number of meals that Jesus was having with people in order for their accusation to have any hope of sticking!

And just as for us, having a meal is more than simply eating food, so also for Jesus, having a meal with someone carried a deeply significant message. It was a sign of acceptance and friendship; and the religious authorities of the day were shocked at whom Jesus was accepting.

5. This can be clearly seen at the beginning of St. Mark's Gospel. In chapter two we find Jesus having a meal with Levi, in the company of "many tax collectors and sinners." This prompted the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees to ask Jesus' disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" To which Jesus replies, "I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners." So Jesus was deliberately keeping table-fellowship with such people in order to convey the message to them that they were accepted by God.
6. The classic example of this is found in the story of Zacchaeus. (Luke 19:1-10)
  - i) As a chief tax collector he was particularly despised by those around him. But Jesus says to him without equivocation, "I must stay at your house today." You can almost hear the gasps of disapproval from the crowd that was following Jesus. "Doesn't he know what sort of man Zacchaeus is? Is Jesus really on the side of the Romans? What about all that money that Zacchaeus has gained by extortion from us?" As verse 7 notes, "All the people saw this and began to mutter, 'He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.'"
  - ii) And yet this was a turning point for Zacchaeus. Whereas other turned up their noses at Zacchaeus, or walked on the other side of the street, Jesus accepted him. And in this acceptance, Zacchaeus found that he didn't have to put up a façade, or live behind a mask; he didn't have to live his life as a cheat or deny his true humanity. So we see this wonderful moment of conversion in which Zacchaeus breaks free from all that has been shackling him, and finds that true wealth is to be found not in riches but in relationships, relationships marked by acceptance and love.
7. Throughout the Bible, being invited to a meal is seen as a sign of acceptance. Our other two readings this morning clearly illustrate this. In Isaiah 55 we have God inviting us with these words. "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!...Listen, listen to me and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare." (vv 1-3)
8. In Acts 10-11 we find Peter struggling with the invitation from Cornelius, a Gentile Centurion, to come and eat with him. Peter, who had been brought up as a strict Jew, was very reluctant to have any fellowship with someone from a Gentile background. Yet when Peter accepts, he comes to realise that God's love and concern is not limited to those of Jewish descent, but rather it extends to all people. In our passage this morning we find Peter justifying his action before the church leaders in Jerusalem who were initially very sceptical.

“So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticised him and said, ‘You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.’” (Acts 11:2-3) Peter then explains who he had been persuaded by God through a vision of food to accept that it was the right course of action to share table fellowship with a Gentile. This was a turning point in both the life of Peter and the life of the Church.

9. This message of acceptance through table fellowship is still true, and it is expressed through Holy Communion. The Lord invites us to be his guests and to share around his table. The Reformers were particularly keen to emphasize this aspect. We can see this in the way they preferred to refer to the “Lord’s Table” rather than the “altar”.
10. This does, of course, raise a question. If a vital aspect of Holy Communion is Jesus’ invitation to us to share in table fellowship, how come the Church has put restrictions on this, so that you have to be confirmed in order to receive communion? This is a good question, and one that deserves to be reviewed. This teaching was originally based on Paul’s instructions to the Corinthian Church where things had got out of hand, and there was no reverence when the Eucharist was celebrated, but rather, “When you come together, it is not the Lord’s Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don’t you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!” (1 Corinthians 11:21-22) Paul had to act to reassert decent standards in worship. There was also the point about sufficient reverence to discern the presence of Christ, as we thought about last week when considering symbolism and sacrament.
11. I would say that these conditions of Paul are met in our contemporary worship – there is order and reverence in our worship, and even through this sermon series there is an awareness of the significance of Holy Communion. I would say that there is a strong case that all who have been baptised should be welcome to receive communion, as part of what it means to be a church family, sharing in table fellowship with our Lord. There is a growing acceptance of this within the worldwide church, and within our Diocese, with special arrangements for people to receive communion before confirmation. This is something that I would very much like our parish to consider.
12. So through Holy Communion we hear Jesus’ gracious invitation to come and join him. Through sharing in table fellowship with him we know we are accepted by him, just as we are. In the communion service, after the minister invites everyone to come and receive communion, we all say together, “Most merciful Lord, your love compels us to come in. Our hands were unclean, our hearts were unprepared; we were not fit even to eat the crumbs from under your table, But you, Lord, are the God of our salvation, and share your bread with sinners.”

So as we come up to receive communion, we take our place in the line behind Zacchaeus and all the tax collectors and sinners with whom Jesus had meals. And it is through this acceptance that we find the truth about ourselves and wholeness.

13. All this is beautifully summed up in George Herbert's poem which we published in February's magazine: Love bade me welcome.

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,  
    Guiltie of dust and sinne.  
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack  
    From my first entrance in  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
    If I lack'd any thing.  
A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:  
    Love said, You shall be he.  
I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,  
    I cannot look on thee.  
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
    Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame  
    Go where it doth deserve.  
And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?  
    My deare, then I will serve.  
You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:  
    So I did sit and eat.