

Table Fellowship with Jesus (Good Friday)

by Rev. Robert Griffith

The Lord Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, reclined at the table with His disciples. This was no ordinary meal. Then again, in the presence of Jesus, every meal was extraordinary. It had nothing to do with the menu or the atmosphere. It had everything to do with the way Jesus shared his table with almost anyone. He set no limits. There were no requirements. He simply invited people to share in his friendship and hospitality. I suppose you could say it was because Jesus loved people. Rich and poor, sick and healthy, sinners and saints. Jesus loved people and enjoyed eating with them.

Now, some of the religious leaders had a problem with Jesus' table manners. They wondered why it was that He chose to eat with "tax collectors and sinners." The answer Jesus gave was quite simple. What better way to make them feel accepted than by breaking bread together? You don't need to be a trained theologian to see the wisdom here! Jesus understood that when people recline at the table together they are all on the same level. And in his day, they actually reclined. Jesus and the Apostles did not sit on chairs at a table. My apologies if you thought Leonardo Da Vinci's famous Last Supper painting was inspired or accurate in its depiction. No, in the ancient world, and in the modern world in some cultures still, they reclined on the ground or on mats and pillows, leaning on their left elbow and eating with their right hand. Their legs were stretched out behind them. We could consider that a very awkward way to eat a meal ... but they would consider sitting upright on chairs at a high table very strange.

In Jesus' time, sharing table fellowship with others was a humbling experience as you lowered yourself and made yourself vulnerable by being as close to the ground as possible, all on the same level, whether host or guest. And Jesus used that fact to bring home to those who felt less than worthy that in his eyes they were his friends. Of course, if they were Jesus' friends, then they were also friends of God .. and that's the *real* meaning of this table fellowship. You see, there's really no way that we can fully appreciate this meal we are about to share if we haven't first understood what the table fellowship of Jesus was all about.

This is called many things in different traditions: The Eucharist; Communion; The Lord's Supper. Regardless of its name, it's not about some kind of magic; it's not about some ghost-like presence we can neither see nor feel. This is supposed to be, first and foremost, about Christian fellowship shared in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. To understand this meal we call a 'sacrament,' we should remember those meals that Jesus shared with "sinners and tax collectors."

Do you remember the story of the little man, Zacchaeus, who climbed high into a tree just for a glimpse of Jesus passing through his village? Zacchaeus never expected Jesus to invite himself to his house for a meal. But if you've read your Gospels, you know that Jesus was full of surprises! So he went to the home of Zacchaeus as a guest. That one act of acceptance was enough to change the life of this little man, forever. A simple act of table fellowship, in the presence of this gracious guest, reclining on the floor, on the same level as Jesus, became a moment of freedom from the bondage of guilt and fear for Zacchaeus.

Again, the people outside the home of Zacchaeus were horrified. Yet again, they missed the point about this Saviour. They said, "This Jesus has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." They just didn't get it. How else was Jesus to reach the heart of this poor soul, if not by accepting him?

The villagers had shunned this sinner, Zacchaeus, for years. Had all their judgement and condemnation brought this man one millimetre closer to repentance or to God? No! So when God Himself shows up at Zac's house for a meal, He only brings love and acceptance, because, that's all He has to bring, because that's Who He is ... and this tax collector did a one-eighty, returning in faith to God!

So if you want the whole Christian gospel of God and our salvation in one little story – turn to the story of Zac and Jesus sharing a meal. If you want to know everything that is wrong with the Church today and throughout human history ... take a look at the people outside Zac's house that night and listen to what they are saying. Then understand that a large chunk of the Church has been doing the same thing for centuries and wondering why people don't want to buy the Jesus they are selling! If you want to know everything that's right with the parts of the Church which have sustained growth today then take a look inside Zac's house where God is lying on the floor breaking bread with a total scum-bag and giving him a life-changing dose of love and acceptance ... which *then* leads to repentance and transformation.

Then there was the scene with Matthew the tax collector, remember? When Jesus went to Matthew's home for a meal that evening, you can bet he was rubbing elbows with bandits and prostitutes! But they were the people Jesus wanted to reach with the message of forgiveness and acceptance. And isn't it interesting that, with the exception of one Pharisee, Jesus was never invited to recline at table with the religious leaders, the Senior Pastors who were the leaders and mentors and role models for the people of God? Perhaps they did not want this Jesus guy to think Himself their equal. If only they had known!

There's a pattern here, isn't there? Jesus ate with sinners and invited himself into their homes and, eventually, their hearts. He may have earned the reputation of being a "drunkard and a glutton" to some of the more judgmental and self-righteous, but it doesn't seem to me that He even thought this title to be an insult. After all, he certainly enjoyed socializing with the so-called "sinners" of society! There was no hidden motive on the part of Jesus. He wasn't there to surprise his host and fellow guests with a "sermon" following the lamb stew! His sole purpose was to be with these folks in order to express the love and acceptance of God for each one. And I have no doubt they listened and received his words and his warmth with thanksgiving.

But I'm equally certain that something of surpassing importance took place following these meals with Jesus. The people who had experienced table fellowship with Jesus could never again break bread together without remembering! That was the spiritual value of His table ministry. Long after he had left their village and their lives, they would remember His presence and His love and His acceptance and His peace. And when they remembered, He was once again with them in the breaking of bread. You see, Jesus taught them a new way to live, laugh, and love together and it called: *Table fellowship!*

But something else strikes me about the way Jesus shared his table with others. Notice that, whenever Jesus joins folks at the table, the line between guest and host begins to fade. In the presence of Jesus Christ, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between the host and the guests. Suddenly there is just this one family breaking and passing the bread, pouring and sharing the cup!

Jesus creates a bond of fellowship and care unparalleled in our world. And He does so simply by being the gracious guest among guests. He makes no pretence to a higher place at table. He claims no right to be honoured. He simply joins His friends at the table. And what He does for them, He wishes them to do for each other.

On that final night, Jesus gathered with His disciples to share a last meal, this was a solemn occasion .. but it was a very meaningful one. Jesus told His friends that every time they broke bread together, they would remember His presence with them at the table. Maybe they would recall His laughter or maybe His loving forgiveness of their stupidities and blunders, not to mention their outright sins! But as they remembered, He would be there! Each time they would gather at the table, the presence of Jesus would be felt .. with and within their common friendship. But they were to break bread, as Jesus had done, as an act of acceptance, love, and care. They were to remember His way of eating with those whom society, or the religious establishment, thought worthless. They would know His presence when they broke bread, as He had broken bread - with sinners! And tell me ... how could they avoid breaking bread with sinners? They were all sinners!

What's more, they were to share table fellowship without turning the meal into a testimonial dinner for superior saints! At this table, all were equal in the sight of God. They were to break bread in a spirit of unity and peace. Breaking bread in this spirit made the presence of Christ a reality for all; and it would make all the more real the message of complete forgiveness and acceptance which Christ himself would issue from beyond the cross and the tomb, four days later.

So here we are. We are here because we want to remember. We want to remember how Jesus lived and particularly today . . . how he died. We want to remember how He cared for sinners and opened His life and love to their pain. We want to remember how Jesus healed the sick and comforted the sorrowful. But most of all, at this point in the service, we want to remember His table fellowship.

We want to remember how His grace cleared away the guilt from human hearts. We want to remember how His compassion gave support and courage to those who were crushed. And we want to remember how Jesus gave strength to those who felt defeated by life. We also want to remember ... that He is here when we break this bread and share this cup in His name and within His Spirit. We remember that He calls us away from brokenness to bounty, away from sin to salvation, away from loneliness to love, away from isolation to community.

With and within the fellowship of this meal, there is neither Protestant nor Catholic, neither Uniting nor Baptist nor Presbyterian, nor Anglican, nor any other any man-made denomination or boundary. At *this* table, we are all one *to* Christ, all one *because of* Christ, all one *in* Christ, and all one *through* the grace and mercy of Christ! "*For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes!*"

Come to the table of Christ, not because you *must*, but because you *may*. Come, not to express an opinion, but to pray for a Spirit. Come, not for a drink of juice and a bit of bread, but for a desire to feel the real presence of the your suffering, dying, risen, reigning, Saviour God. Come, not because you are filled already, but because in your emptiness, you stand in need of God's mercy and forgiveness as much today as you did the first time your eyes were opened to His amazing grace.

Come to this table with the weight of guilt dragging you down, if that's how you feel! Don't fake it; don't check your baggage at the door. Bring your baggage all here, and lay it before Jesus. Come with your questions and cares, your fears and uncertainties. Come to the table of the One Who loves you and wants only that you live life more fully. Come to the table of the One who knows you better than you know yourself and yet desires that you become His faithful follower.

Come to the table of Jesus Christ and remember!