

## 'Come Dine With Us'

*(Luke 14:16-17) Then Jesus said to him, 'Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, "Come, for everything is ready now."'*

When it came to choosing a reading for this Holy Habits service with the focus of 'Eating Together' I had little choice but to pick the Parable of the Great Feast from Luke 14. The reason for this lack of choice is because of one person, Rev. Florence Gundala. Florence is a minister of the Church of South India who served for 5 years in Birmingham under the Methodist World Church in Britain scheme. Before she returned to Bangalore, Florence worked alongside me for several months at the Methodist Central Mission.

There are many stories told about Florence's time among us, including the time she was standing at a bus stop with the intention of going to a Local Preachers' meeting, when she met a group of smartly dressed women who told her that they were going to play bingo and invited her along. Florence accepted their invitation, and experienced her first game of bingo – and won the jackpot! To celebrate, Florence bought fish and chips for all of her new friends on the way back home.

One morning Florence came to me with the Parable of the Great Feast and asked, "What if you had not heard of Jesus, didn't know the Gospel, and had no understanding of Church, could you build a Christian community on this parable?" In order to answer that question was the beginning of Street Banquet, our homeless outreach project.

In certain company, Jesus was a terrible dinner guest. There he was being wined and dined by the leader of the Pharisees, when he went out of his way to upset his host and fellow dinner guests. "When you give a luncheon or a dinner," says Jesus, "Don't invite your pals who will invite you to their homes in return, but invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind – those very people who cannot repay you." In response to this direct challenge, one pious soul utters the words, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God." In his response to these trite words, Jesus tells this parable.

The story Jesus told would have sounded familiar to his fellow dinner guests, because there was a popular Jewish tale of the time about a 'nouveau riche'

tax collector. This self-made man wanted some social standing, so invited the local aristocrats around for a dinner. But those with the 'old money' looked down their noses at this man, so they rejected his invitation. At the end of the tale the tax collector is forced to invite in the poor to eat the dinner so that his food is not wasted, much to amusement of those he hoped to impress.

But Jesus turns this popular story on its head. In his Parable of the Great Feast the host is not trying to impress anyone, instead he is furious when the rejections arrive. He is so mad that he commands his servant not once, but twice, to bring in the very people who would never be able to repay him; now they were the honoured guests at his table.

So in answer to Florence's question about building a Christian community on this very parable the answer is "Yes – indeed!" The Parable of the Great Feast encapsulates the very essence of Jesus' life, ministry and Gospel. He continued that great tradition of God's People in which table-fellowship challenged prejudices, broke down barriers and created communities. But Jesus took this much further, because at the heart of his mission was the sharing of food as a taste of God's New World, where the forgotten are found, the rejected are embraced and the despised have become honoured guests. In other words, eating together as Christians is both a symbol and the practice of heaven on earth, and where this does not occur (as Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 11) then we are not the Church of Jesus Christ.

I live with my family in Sparkhill near to where the Sparkhill United (URC / Moravian) congregation used to meet. When they vacated their building to worship and then unite with Hall Green Methodists, a rumour went about the local community that the church premises were about to be converted into a banqueting hall. I thought that would be wonderful!

In 1890 a novel was published called *News from Nowhere* written by the Arts & Crafts Socialist, William Morris. This is the story of William Guest, who travels 200 years into the future and discovers a utopian society where all people are equal and free (a sharp contrast to Britain in the late-Victorian period). At the end of the novel William Guest is taken to church, which is now a banqueting hall where worship has become a feast served up for all.

In the end the old Sparkhill United building did not become a banqueting hall, it was converted into a rather exclusive restaurant, which was quite the opposite of my hopes. Yet, the vision remains of the Church of the Great

Feast. Such a vision was promoted by Inderjit Bhogal when he was President of the Methodist Conference. Drawing on his own Sikh heritage and practice of hospitality, Inderjit offers a vivid image of God's New World:

*My vision of Church and Community pictures God's table and banquet which has room for all people, of all nations, of all ages. God's respect, God's embrace and God's life includes everyone. Human beings create the strategies which give pride of place to a chosen few at the Table and place the rest underneath the table to eat the scraps that fall off, or are thrown at them. In Jesus, God calls us to end divisive strategies so that all may sit and eat together at the Table for all.*

These are wonderful words, a wonderful vision, with wonderful aspirations. But if we believe these words and share that vision and want to live such hope, then in this age of global migration with 100s of 1,000s of people fleeing war, persecution and poverty, then this simple call to eat together becomes a radical act: a radical act of defiance, of solidarity, of new community. Because by sharing our food we acknowledge our common needs, we celebrate our common humanity, and we declare our call for justice. Yes, by eating together we accept the invitation to God's Table.

And so, to adopt this 'Holy Habit' we bring meaning to what we already do (our Street Banquet, First Sunday Lunch, Easter Breakfast, etc.) and it offers an opportunity to reach out further. Because every meal shared in Jesus' name is an appetizer of what God want for us and every child of God – when the servant is heard to say,

“Everything is ready now, so come dine with us!”

Neil Johnson

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