

LOVE PRAY EAT

THE SPIRITUALITY & HOSPITALITY OF JESUS



*The **Son of Man** came eating and drinking, and you say, Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners' (Luke).*

*If you take the mountains and **meals** out of the Bible, it is a very short book. In a world of competing church models and strategies ... Jesus employed one practice over all others: **sharing a meal** with people.... grace, mission and community are never enacted best through programmes and propaganda, but rather through the equality and acceptance experienced at the **common table**. May our lives never be too busy to live this out.*

(Mike Breen)

A Study and Devotional Guide to the Meals of Jesus In Luke's Gospel

By Nicholas Tuohy

Introduction

The significance of food and meals

Eating is the universal language. Plankton, plants, parrots and primates all share it. For carbon based life forms, food is life and its absence is death. Food unifies people and precipitates wars. But something else can happen for humans when they gather around food—something unique to humans. We shape, prepare, cook, and serve our food with a diligence and attentiveness that sets us apart from all other creatures. As some have noted, the human being is the ‘cooking animal’. We don’t just eat food; we make a big deal of it and place it at the centre of our celebrations. Eating has meaning and significance for human beings. It’s as though sharing meals together has a spiritual dimension. Well, it does.

The first thing God commanded humans in the Genesis creation narrative were, “You are free to eat”. Maybe what God really meant was “You are free to cook”. That is, enjoy food, take the time to grow it, prepare it, and share it with others. We are “free to eat” but we are not free “not to eat!” For all of our sophistication, our discoveries, our mastery over the natural world, our Enlightenment dreaming, our postmodern philosophical meanderings, this equation is irrefutable: if we do not eat, we die. The beauty and simplicity of eating is this: it is democratic; all humans regardless of race, religion, gender, socio-economic status, education, etc., share the need to eat in order to survive.

Jesus at the table in Luke’s Gospel

Luke’s Gospel shows that Jesus and the early church relied on food and hospitality provided in homes to extend the mission of bringing the good news of the kingdom of God to Israel, and subsequently to Gentiles. This also meant that the provision of meals in homes was also a means of serving Christ and one another through table ministry, which was a job performed mostly by women and slaves.

In Luke’s gospel, plenty happens in homes and at tables when Jesus is present. People repent, are healed, saved, silenced, taught, rebuked, humiliated, included, excluded, forgiven, condemned, and of course, they eat and drink. The house and the table are dynamic places of action. Furthermore, Jesus eats with sinners,

the righteous, the rich, the poor, men, women, the reputable, the disreputable, leaders, the despised, the esteemed, friends and enemies.

A few more things take place too. Firstly, in becoming a disciple of Jesus a person concurrently offers their house and possessions in service of the mission and ministry of Jesus.

Secondly, by eating with “sinners” and tax collectors, Jesus is inviting them to participate in his kingdom. As one writer says, “sharing a table is the first sign of membership in a group”.

Thirdly, he instances of Simon’s mother-in-law (4:38-41), the women who serve Jesus (8:3), and Martha (10:38-42), show that women had significant places of ministry through table service in the house churches where believers gathered. Even the “sinful” women in 7:36-50 serves Jesus at table and thus becomes an example to all “sinners” that they too can serve the mission of Jesus.

Finally, these domestic meal scenes in Luke serve as a window by which Luke can address the actual house-church communities where followers of Jesus are meeting together. Through the scenes in Luke of Jesus in homes and at table, the house-church communities, and of course, us today, become extended guests in all that happens. In this way the meal scenes act as a means of on-going instruction and teaching to Christians meeting in homes. What Jesus says at table in Luke he also says to the early church gathered in homes and at tables. Learning from Jesus at the table shows us that being spiritual and following Jesus does not separate us from others or “mundane” daily life; it connects us more deeply.

Jesus’ meals with “sinners” are acted parables of the kingdom of God. That is, through table-fellowship Jesus demonstrates his love and acceptance of people. Luke intentionally highlights the practice of hospitality because he believed it was the most effective means of gospel transmission to Gentiles, for it best demonstrated the message of Christ. What might this mean for us today where many in our society will never step foot near a church, though they might come over for a BBQ? Sharing meals with others is not just a way to share the gospel, but actually a way to live out the gospel in practice.

Introduction continued

Luke's summary description of the early church's activity (Acts 2:42-47) highlight the sharing of meals (2:42). The fellowship, friendship and unity described by Luke were the manifestation of both the spiritual sharing in the good news of Jesus Christ, and the material sharing of meals. That is, when Luke sums up the early Christian community, he describes it as one unified and bonded in partnership with the good news of Jesus Christ through the sharing of meals in homes. It is as though the spiritual reality of their shared faith in Jesus Christ is manifested in meal sharing with "glad and sincere hearts" (Acts 2:46b).

Hospitality in the Bible

Hospitality (which in Greek literally means "love strangers") was, and still is, a foundational practice in the Middle East. The OT is full of examples of hospitality and significant events taking place around meals. In the NT Christians are exhorted to "practice hospitality" (Rom 12:13), to offer "hospitality to one another without grumbling" (1 Pet 4:9), and "entertain strangers" (Heb 13:2). All three of these exhortations to hospitality are immediately preceded by the command and encouragement to love one another (Rom 12:13 and 1 Pet 4:9; Heb 13:2), which signifies the manner in which hospitality strengthened and deepened the bonds of fellowship between members. The people were also encouraged to provide hospitality for those who are itinerant preachers (3 Jn 8), and widows were especially exhorted to offer such hospitality to the church (1 Tim 5:10). And leaders were to lead by example with the Elder role description declaring the ability to be hospitable a must (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:8). One such leader, Gaius, is commended by Paul for his excellent hospitality offered to the whole church (Rom 16:23). Hospitality around meals in homes was fundamental and central in the mission of Jesus and in the early church.

The church today

It's sad to say, but the reality of the early church gathering for teaching, fellowship, and ministry primarily in homes is perhaps lost to Western Christians with our centralised buildings. Moreover, most mainline denominations are accus-

tomed to the Eucharist or Lord's Supper being served by ordained clergy and partaken in church buildings. This was not the experience of the early church. The church largely functioned in people's homes until around 314C.E. Something was lost when the church became the official religion of the state and money and power flooded in. The church gained wealth, but it lost sharing; it gained power, but it lost purpose, it gained cathedrals, but lost the intimate fellowship of the home. We can't undo the history of Christendom, but we can look afresh at Jesus in Luke's gospel to help reshape and recover the art of integrating a kingdom spirituality into a generous and personal hospitality. When the first Christians opened their hearts to Jesus and their homes to Jesus something powerful and beautiful happened: a fellowship of love and life emerged that shook the known world and turned it upside down. My prayer is that as we open our hearts and homes to Jesus, being more mindful of him at every meal, we would see the same.

You see, hospitality is not just a method to share the gospel; it is the gospel manifested, it's what the kingdom of God looks like. When the Bible, and Jesus talk about the kingdom of God being like a banquet, that's not a metaphor but a literal description:

*On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines. Is 25:6.*

When we open our hearts and homes to Jesus and share meals together, we are getting a foretaste of what's to come. And our call as a church is to invite others to our tables so that they might taste it too.

As you journey with Jesus at the table in Luke, watch his life and actions and listen to him. Let him teach you how to integrate his life and Spirit into your everyday living.. Learn from the spiritual life of Jesus and learn hospitality from the master host. Write down what you see in Jesus that you can practice in your own life and write a prayer that asks for God's help to live like Jesus .

God Moves into the Neighbourhood - Luke 4:14-28

Read the Story Carefully, slowly, Prayerfully with Eyes and Heart Wide Open

Background to the Story

Jesus heads to his hometown of Nazareth, but so much has happened in a few chapters preceding. Luke tells us Jesus is the long awaited Jewish Messiah and “Son of the Most High” (1:32-33), and an angel shows up terrifying some shepherds to tell them that baby Jesus is “Christ the Lord” (2:11; “Christ” is Greek for King or anointed one, while “Messiah” is the Hebrew term meaning the same). When Mary and Joseph present Jesus to the Lord at the temple in Jerusalem (cf. Ex 13:2,12), a man named Simeon was moved by the Holy Spirit to declare to God that his “eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (Lk 2:30-32). The hometown crowd know none of this.

John the Baptist prepares the way (3:1-20) for Jesus’ public ministry, and although John preaches “good news” to the people, this good news in Luke points to the coming of the saviour Jesus, the one who is revealed as God’s Son. (1:32, 35; 3:22b), and receives the anointing of the Holy Spirit (3:22a; 4:14, 18a). Jesus’ first public statements in Luke (4:18-19) identify his mission and status as being the messianic figure of Isaiah 61:1-2, one who is Spirit-anointed by the God to preach/announce good news to the poor, sent to proclaim freedom for prisoners, sight for the blind, release the oppressed, and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.

But his old mates and family are having none of it. The church service ends badly with the congregation trying to toss Jesus off a cliff. At least it wasn't a boring service! Jesus moves on and announces the imperatives of his mission by claiming, “I must preach/announce the good news of the kingdom of God...that is why I was sent” (4:43).

Jesus models a spirituality that is committed to prayer, regularly gathering with God’s people, honouring the Scriptures, and serving God’s purposes in the world regarding sharing the good news, doing justice and showing mercy. Could we find a better example of a healthy spiritual life?

Questions to Ponder and Pray Over

Luke has told us Jesus is King, Lord, Saviour, Son of God, Christ, Messiah etc, but he looks and acts pretty much like a normal person. Yes, there are miracles to come, but the point remains that he wasn't glowing and didn't float 6 inches off the ground. The folks at Nazareth just saw him as one of them. ***Discuss how Jesus is deeply spiritual and very human at the same time. What might this mean for how as Christians we can live a deeply spiritual and Godly life?***

It has been said that "God doesn't have a mission for His church, he has a church for His mission." God's Mission in Luke begins with the God who sends Jesus, then with Jesus who sends his disciples, and finally the church in Acts also has authority to send in Jesus' name. ***What does Jesus articulate about his mission in 4:18-19? Read and also consider also the statements in 4:40-44, 5:31-32 and 7:20-23. What does the good news look and sound like in those summaries?***

Consider both the word and deed nature of Jesus' mission. ***What does the good news need to look and sound like in our day? What in fact is the "good news"? How can we share both deeds of love and words about Jesus with others?***

What can I learn from Jesus here and put into practice in my own life?

Praying it into action and everyday living...

The Healing & Liberating Message of Jesus - 4:31-44

Read the Story Carefully, slowly, Prayerfully with Eyes and Heart Wide Open

Background to the Story

Simon's mother-in-law is sick with a high fever, and when Jesus hears about it he heals her by rebuking the fever. This is Jesus' first healing, and in Luke healings are a sign of the kingdom of God that Jesus preaches (cf. 9:11; 10:9; 11:20).

Luke describes that "immediately" she arose and began to serve them, which would indicate that she serves a meal. Luke frequently uses the Greek word *diakonos*, which means "to serve at table," in relation to women (8:3; 10:40; Acts 6:1-2), but it is also used of Jesus as "one who serves" (22:27). It also means "ministry" and "to serve" and it is where we get our word "deacon".

So early on in Jesus' mission it is clear women have a legitimate place of service through providing meals for those who preach and teach, and for other members of the church. Once someone becomes a disciple of Jesus, they are fit for service, and women as leaders of the home had a vital role in cooking for Jesus and his messengers. While through 21st century eyes this may appear repressive, in that culture, to have a position of service within a religious community was rarely the place of women, especially within the worship rites of God's Temple. But here in Peter's home, Peter's mother-in-law becomes a minister to the mission of Jesus. Jesus has just preached in the Synagogue, stays at Peter's house, and then the following morning he heads out to "preach the good news of the kingdom of God" (v. 43). But in the meantime, her ministry aids the mission of Jesus when Simon's house becomes a place of healing and deliverance for many who come after sundown (vv. 40-41).

It is not insignificant that at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Luke, a house and hospitality figures prominently. Spiritual life and hospitality mingled together beautifully; the kingdom of God and the home of Simon become one.

Questions to Ponder and Pray Over

Look carefully at where the ministry of Jesus takes place: in the Synagogue (the church of the day), but also in “the home of Simon.” ***If you had to choose between doing church in the church building or in a home, which would you choose and why? How can your home become an outpost of God’s kingdom?***

In this passage we see Jesus teaching with authority, overcoming evil, healing people and welcoming everyone. Spend some time examining how many references to preaching/teaching, and how many times he attends people’s needs. ***Why is it important to do both and do we sometimes see today an imbalance in the church in doing both of these? In what ways?***

Jesus encounters evil spirits who know who he is and takes authority over them. How do we reconcile Jesus’ conviction that evil spirits were real with modern scientific views that say they are not? Can sickness be spiritual sometimes?

Jesus clearly knows and articulates his mission and purpose in vv.43-44. ***Can you articulate your mission and purpose in life? What is it?***

What can I learn from Jesus here and put into practice in my own life?

Praying it into action and everyday living...

When Jesus Gate-crashes your Party - 5:27-39

Read the Story Carefully, slowly, Prayerfully with Eyes and Heart Wide Open

Background to the Story

Tax or toll collectors in Jesus day were money-hungry traitors who had sold out their own people to get rich by serving the occupying power of Rome. This was who Levi was. In a shocking move, Jesus not only calls Levi to be his disciple, but accepts an invitation to go to his house for a party. The religious heavies press Jesus and ask, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” (v. 30). Jesus’ response in vv. 31-32 does not rebut the accusation that they are sinners, but Jesus states he has come calling sinners to repentance, which is a major theme in Luke-Acts. However, the call to repent does not deter sinners from feeling comfortable being around Jesus. (cf. 7:36-50; 15:1). And Jesus later relates the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin and exclaims that “In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (cf Lk 15:1-8).

In their defence the Pharisees were only acting in accord with widespread beliefs and practice, not only within Judaism, but within the wider ancient world where sharing your table equalled spiritual oneness between parties. And as such, by eating with “sinners” Jesus is offering the kingdom of God to them—and this infuriates many of the pious religious people.

Clearly then, Levi’s hospitality toward Jesus and the guests provide a location for Jesus’ mission to extend and proceed. The fact that Levi invites his friends and associates alludes to his own mission activity as he brings others to hear the good news, that the messiah has welcomed him. He uses his networks and his home to allow the mission of Jesus to reach more people. In this sense, Levi, through his home and his party, becomes a missionary through whom the mission of Jesus is extended. And as such, Levi becomes a model to other believers—especially the rich—to do likewise. He had not gone to Bible college, didn't do an internship, but was just very excited about meeting Jesus and wanted to share this good news with his mates. Evangelism never sounded so simple!

Questions to Ponder and Pray Over

The devout religious folks were very upset over Jesus attending Levi's party. ***Why do you think Jesus was willing to "eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners"? And how do you decide who you eat with? How might knowing Jesus influence whom you eat with?***

Sociologist, Rodney Stark notes that the primary transmission of religions conversion is social networking and friendships. That is, people come to faith mostly through friendship and social contact with other people of faith. Perhaps that's why Christianity grew so rapidly when churches were in peoples homes. ***What do you think was the impact on Levi's social network after he became a passionate follower of Jesus? How might your own social network be impacted by your faith in Jesus? Ho might you look for opportunities to bring Christian and non-Christian friends together?***

Although the Isaiah passage of preaching good news to the poor is set as a mantle of Jesus' messianic credentials (4:18-19), Jesus is shown to also preach good news to the rich, such as Levi. ***What aspects of the good news do you think the rich need to hear today and why? Are you rich?***

What can I learn from Jesus here and put into practice in my own life?

Praying it into action and everyday living...

The Lost & Lonely find Love - 7:36-50

Read the Story Carefully, slowly, Prayerfully with Eyes and Heart Wide Open

Background to the Story

That Jesus regularly dines with Pharisees in Luke's Gospel may come as somewhat of a surprise. They were powerful, wealthy, respected and certainly not marginalised or considered outcasts. At one such dinner party he is reclining with the religious and cultural elite men of the town at Simon the Pharisee's house, when suddenly a "sinful woman" gate crashes the party. She would not have been welcome to dine in such a setting on at least two fronts: being a sinner and a woman. In a culture where women were veiled, she shocks everyone by letting down her hair, weeping, anointing Jesus' feet and wiping them with her hair.

Jesus tells a story about having debts forgiven which shows the woman is aware of her great debts but Simon is oblivious to his. Both need forgiveness from God to whom they are in debt, forgiveness that Jesus offers them. The woman "sees" Jesus and responds with love, but Simon can't really "see" who Jesus is and responds with indifference. Simon provided no water for Jesus' feet; the woman wet them with her tears and wiped them with her hair; Simon did not give Jesus a greeting kiss; but the woman has repeatedly kissed Jesus' feet; Simon did not provide oil for Jesus' head; the woman poured expensive perfume on Jesus' feet.

Simon's religion is one of pretence and façade and Jesus sharply, and publicly, criticises this upstanding and religiously devoted man. In Luke, how you share a meal with Jesus is a sign that either you accept him, or are judged by him.

The unnamed sinful woman finds peace at Simon's dinner; we can only imagine peace was something that eluded Simon at the dinner table. What starts with a simple invitation to Jesus for a meal ends with Simon's theological foundations and understandings strewn across the dinner table.

Luke shows in this story that anyone, regardless of reputation, is fully welcomed at Jesus' table and is invited to become a servant in Jesus' mission in the world. Even a "sinful" woman.

Questions to Ponder and Pray Over

Take note through Luke's Gospel of the tension between Jesus and the religious elite. *Why is it that many of those devoted to the bible, committed to worship, and passionate in obeying God are missing God at work in the life of Jesus? And why are the "sinful" and outcasts so attracted to Jesus?*

Jesus does not deny the woman is a "sinner" and takes it a step further by stating she had "many sins" (v.47). Jesus repeatedly calls people to turn from their sins (repent) and believe in him. *What is the woman's response to her forgiveness? What is the guests reaction? What does, or would, having assurance that God forgives all your sin mean for you?*

Jesus asks Simon "do you see this woman?", but the truth is he only say a "sinner", not a lost daughter of God made in His image. *In what ways in our society do we still objectify people and fail to see them as God's children? How does Jesus treat people—especially the outcasts? How should we?*

Biblical scholar, Reta Halteman Finger, says "food, meals, and eating together continue to convey strong symbolism", and asks *"if theology is communicated through meals, what kind of theology is the church communicating today?"*

Who could you invite to your table this week to live this out?

What can I learn from Jesus here and put into practice in my own life?

Praying it into action and everyday living...

Jesus Satisfies our Needs - 9:10-20

Read the Story Carefully, slowly, Prayerfully with Eyes and Heart Wide Open

Background to the Story

The apostles were tired and weary from their short-term mission trip in the villages of Judea. Luke tells us they had been “proclaiming the good news and healing people everywhere.” In other words, they had been doing what Jesus was doing. Can you imagine how excited and exuberated they were when they got back to tell Jesus all the things that had happened and what God did through their ministry? But they must have been exhausted and weary. Serving God is important work and demands much mental, emotional and physical energy. The sensible thing to do is get some rest by getting away with Jesus. But God’s ways are not our ways and God’s thoughts are not our thoughts.

It seems someone has leaked information about the apostles’ private retreat with Jesus, and before long crowds of people start showing up! Can you imagine how the apostles felt? “Go away!” they probably thought. But what does Jesus do? “He welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God and healed those who needed healing.” Jesus really loved people and his life and ministry reveals the heart of God for humanity. God created us to share His joy, to share in the loving community of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But our rebellion and sin severed that relationship. Jesus came to restore that community between God and people. He welcomed them...

But what about the miracle of feeding 5000 people? We are called to have faith in God’s power. But as N.T. Wright says, “We aren’t called to believe that Jesus can, as it were, do tricks to order. He wasn’t a magician. What he did on this rare occasion was to allow God’s creative power to flow through him in a special way, as with his healings only more so. And, as the gospel-writers describe this incident with words so familiar in the later church from celebrations of the Lord’s Supper (he ‘took the bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it’), we Christians are invited to invoke that same healing, creative power in all that we do, in everything that flows from our life of worship.”

Questions to Ponder and Pray Over

It seems Jesus whole mission was focused on two things: obeying God and serving people. Consider Jesus response when the crowds found him: “He welcomed them...” ***What is being welcomed? How do you feel about being welcomed by God through what Jesus has done for us? How can we welcome others- even when we are tired? How can our homes and our church be more welcoming?***

Luke describes Jesus prayer life by stating: “At daybreak, Jesus went out to a solitary place.” (4:42); and that “Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.” (5:16); and “Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him (9:18). Clearly Jesus models a spiritual life of caring for ones own needs and creating space to be renewed by God for the ministry he calls us to. ***Why do you think Jesus loved to pray alone? In what ways are you finding space for silence, solitude and prayer before God? What helps you to be renewed and refreshed spiritually?***

Miracles are not miracles to God; they are just God being God. Feeding 5000 was easy for God. But not all miracles are dramatic and obvious. ***Where are you seeing God’s work in your life at the moment? And what stops us from fully trusting God and his mighty power?***

What can I learn from Jesus here and put into practice in my own life?

Praying it into action and everyday living...

Opening up our Homes to Jesus - 10:38-42

Read the Story Carefully, slowly, Prayerfully with Eyes and Heart Wide Open

Background to the Story

In Jesus' day women didn't welcome religious leaders into their homes— men did. But no men are connected to Mary and Martha in this story. Perhaps Mary & Martha are widows; perhaps they never married; perhaps they are orphans. But whatever the case a self-respecting religious teacher concerned for his reputation would not be seen hanging out at the house of two single women. Except Jesus.

As with much of history, in the first century the practicalities of hospitality such as purchasing and preparing food, cooking, serving meals, and cleaning up fell to women. In Greco-Roman times women were not allowed to vote nor hold elected offices, but were limited to the domestic sphere. Things were similar for Jewish women like Martha and Mary. The home was the woman's place, the father had total authority over her until twelve and a half, the duties of a wife were bound to the home and her husband was essentially her master. Boundaries were present within the Temple area that excluded women, and women were not permitted as students of the Bible. A woman's testimony was not permitted in a religious court and they carried an inferior status along with children and slaves.

Jesus and his disciples are travelling on mission and preaching and teaching in towns and villages, when they are offered hospitality (food and lodging) by Martha. Both Mary and Martha seek to serve Jesus; Mary by listening attentively to the teaching of Jesus, and Martha by providing food and hospitality. However, in this instance, Jesus forbids the domestic duties of providing hospitality to take priority over teaching his disciples. It is not the preparation of the meal that Martha is corrected for, but the placing of the meal at the centre of attention and trying to take a disciple away from learning at the feet of the master. Jesus and his disciples rely upon the hospitality of Martha for their mission, but the mission comes first; cooking and cleaning second.

Questions to Ponder and Pray Over

Is this story simply about being active or contemplative? Perhaps this story tells us, and the church, that though organising and planning are needed, such things can never be at the centre of our lives and our churches. Budgets, rosters, events, church business meetings, planning and reports are not bad things; they are just not the main thing. It's about priorities. Jesus, his Word and his mission come first. Always. Thinking about how you spend your time and your money, what you worry about and what makes you happy, *what place does Jesus, his Word and his mission have in your life? What about in our church— is Jesus and his mission and purposes the main thing? What are our “Martha” moments?*

What does it say to you that Jesus allows Mary to be a disciple and learn at his feet, and honours Martha by accepting her offer of hospitality? What did Jesus' actions convey to Mary and Martha and other women of the day?

What can you learn from Martha? What can you learn from Mary?

Theologian Shannon Jung outlines six practices that he encourages churches and Christians to consider: saying grace, sharing and hospitality, communal feasting, preparing food, fasting, and honouring our bodies. *Consider these and discuss how are you using your home, gifts, time and resources to serve Jesus' mission in in your everyday life? How could we do this more as a church?*

What can I learn from Jesus here and put into practice in my own life?

Praying it into action and everyday living...

Jesus Insults Religious People (on purpose!) - 11:37-54

Read the Story Carefully, slowly, Prayerfully with Eyes and Heart Wide Open

Background to the Story

Jesus once again eats with the religious elite (see also 14:1-12), when one Pharisee is surprised by Jesus' failure to wash before eating, something Jews did before meals, Bible study and prayer. Jesus is not long reclined at table when he issues four strident rebukes regarding the hypocrisy and abject failure of the Pharisees in their attempted devotion to God (11:39-44).

We need to keep in context that the fact Jesus is eating with the Pharisees indicates acceptance of them and fellowship with them. And as such, the early church, and us too, are being counselled on managing relationships with other hostile groups- perhaps even members of their own families. Jesus' example is to continue table-fellowship with anyone. And being on the receiving end of a rebuke from Jesus does not necessarily mean exclusion and judgement (cf. 9:51), and Jesus will teach later "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him" (17:3). To Jesus, the Pharisees are brothers and he rebukes out of love.

In this meal scene, Jesus' rebukes the Pharisees and lawyers because of their exclusion of the poor from their tables. Though these Jewish leaders are fastidious and disciplined in outward observances of purity such as ritual washings, and tithing their mint and rue, they are withholding alms for the poor (v. 41), neglecting justice and the love of God (v. 42), coveting places and positions of public honour (v. 43), burdening people and failing to help them (v. 46), persecuting the prophets sent by God (vv. 47-51), and withholding knowledge from the people and obstructing them in devotion to God (v. 52).

Jesus' mission of salvation to bring good news to the poor, the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed is implicit in his rebuke. Jesus, does not shy away from challenging those who obstruct this good news, even when he is the meal guest in someone else's home. As C.S. Lewis once said, "If the Divine call does not make us better, it will make us very much worse. Of all bad men religious bad men are the worst." Jesus seeks to save "bad religious people" by his loving rebuke.

Questions to Ponder and Pray Over

Jesus is passionate for the Word of God, passionate for holiness and utter obedience for God, moves in the power of the Holy Spirit and calls sinful people to stop sinning. On the other hand, he is scathing towards injustice, greed, empty religion and rituals, and is devoted to helping the poor and oppressed. ***How does he so beautifully integrate holiness and devotion to God with actions of justice, mercy and compassion? How can we integrate both faithfulness to God and His Word and living lives of love, justice and service?***

Read carefully the substance of Jesus' rebuke of the pious religious folk. (39-52). ***Why is their religion so empty and why does it upset Jesus so much?***

Sharing meals and sharing a table with others is not always easy. There can be tense moments, arguments and disagreements. But Jesus doesn't. He accepts the invitation from those hostile to him. ***Who do you avoid eating with and why? What can we learn from Jesus in this regard? Who might you find it difficult to invite to your table and why? Will you invite them?***

Author, Amy Oden, observes that the "early Christians talk about hospitality to the sick and the injured, to the widow and the orphan, to the sojourner and stranger, to the aged, to the slave and imprisoned, to the poor and hungry." ***How can we as a church show such hospitality to the vulnerable in our society?***

What can I learn from Jesus here and put into practice in my own life?

Praying it into action and everyday living...

Jesus Dines with the Rich and Infamous - 19:1-10

Read the Story Carefully, slowly, Prayerfully with Eyes and Heart Wide Open

Background to the Story

Jesus shares his last meal outside of Jerusalem before his trial and death, with a wealthy chief tax-collector named Zacchaeus. Jesus invites himself (and no doubt his entourage), and Zacchaeus' response is to welcome Jesus with joy, a characteristic strikingly absent from Jesus' meals with the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law. While sharing a meal with Jesus, Zacchaeus announces he will give half of his wealth to the poor and recompense fourfold anyone he has defrauded (v. 8).

Does one need to renounce all possessions and give away all wealth to be a disciple of Jesus (14:33; 18:28)? The ambiguity is solved here in the home of Zacchaeus: almsgiving is a visible sign of the reception of the good news of the kingdom of God, and an indication of the repentance that Jesus seeks; however, salvation comes to Zacchaeus even though he keeps half of his wealth. But neither can we gloss over the fact that Jesus has previously stated he is calling (warning) the rich to start with almsgiving and relinquish their wealth.

The message to the rich in the early church and to us is to become "Sons of Abraham" by being transformed like Zacchaeus from reluctant and greedy traitor, to generous provider of aid to the poor and hospitality to serve the mission of Jesus. Thus, a note of hope is given to the rich for whom it is difficult to enter the kingdom of God (18:25). This story challenges those with wealth, to open their homes and their tables to the poor, just as Zacchaeus is now doing. That such practice is present in Acts would suggest the church listened to Jesus (9:36; 10:4, 31; 24:17).

Finally, although Zacchaeus offers Jesus hospitality, it is not just eating and drinking with Jesus that allows participation in his kingdom. It is only the open-hearted reception of Jesus, and the accompanying repentance, that enables one to enter into his kingdom. For Jesus has already warned regarding future judgement: "Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!'" (13:26-27). And as is the case with Zacchaeus, eating and drinking with Jesus must include a welcome and embracing of his mission.

Questions to Ponder and Pray Over

As someone once said, you know if you are rich because you say “what shall we eat?”; the poor say “shall we eat?” Australia is a very wealthy country. Salvation for Zacchaeus included helping the poor. He wasn't saved because he helped the poor, but he gave as a result of Jesus' welcome. ***What responsibility as Christians in a wealthy nation do we have towards helping the poor? And why does Jesus preach good news to, and teach the poor—don't they just need food?***

Zacchaeus eats and drinks with Jesus, but unlike many of the Pharisees, Zacchaeus not only opens his home to Jesus, but his heart as well. ***If “home is where the heart is” where is your heart? Does Jesus have a little cupboard in a far corner or has he taken up residence in the living room? Zacchaeus made some changes to make room for Jesus; what changes could you/our church make?***

Whether he is with “sinners”, religious elite, rich and shonky tax-collectors like Zacchaeus, Jesus never bends and changes to suit the crowd he is in. He is unified in his person and mission. ***What is it about his spiritual life and practices that enable his inner life and his public life to be seamless and unified? What would help us to be more integrated in what we believe and how we live for Jesus?***

What can I learn from Jesus here and put into practice in my own life?

Praying it into action and everyday living...

Welcoming Jesus at Every Meal - 24:13-35

Read the Story Carefully, slowly, Prayerfully with Eyes and Heart Wide Open

Background to the Story

Jesus is dead. All those wild and wondrous times on the road with him, sticking it to the religious leaders, welcoming the nobodies, sharing meals, hearing about God's kingdom and laughing around the table are finished. Or maybe not...

Two disciples are their way home to Jerusalem when they are joined by a stranger, and are shocked to find out he apparently knows nothing of what has just taken place in Jerusalem concerning Jesus of Nazareth. The stranger patently listens and then begins to hold an impromptu bible study explain what was really going on with Jesus. As they near home the stranger makes out he is heading on somewhere else and they invite him in to stay the night. The stranger takes over as host, breaks bread and prays and then disappears! They realise it was Jesus and run to tell the Eleven apostles "Jesus is alive!"

N.T. Wright wonderfully summarises what it means that Jesus has risen: "The message of the resurrection is that this world matters! That the injustices and pains of this present world must now be addressed with the news that healing, justice and love have won... If Easter means Jesus Christ is only raised in a spiritual sense - [then] it is only about me, and finding a new dimension in my spiritual life. But if Jesus Christ is truly risen from the dead, Christianity becomes good news for the whole world - news which warms our hearts precisely because it isn't just about warming hearts. Easter means that in a world of injustice, violence and degradation are endemic, God is not prepared to tolerate such things - and that we will work and plan, with all the energy of God, to implement [the] victory of Jesus over them all. Take away Easter and Karl Marx was probably right to accuse Christianity of ignoring problems of the material world. Take it away and Freud was probably right to say Christianity is wish-fulfillment. Take it away and Nietzsche probably was right to say it was for wimps." (N.T. Wright, *For All God's Worth*).

The Emmaus story gives us such hope that because Jesus is alive, things will never be the same and the best is always yet to come.

Questions to Ponder and Pray Over

The Emmaus story may well summarise the whole gospel. That is, God created us to walk together in friendship with Him and with one another, sharing the abundance of creation as a gift. Sin destroyed this, but Jesus has restored things to how they were meant to be. The risen Lord Jesus walks with the disciples—and you get the sense he is being playful with them— then joins them for a meal.

What hope does the resurrection give us in a broken and hurting world?

The story reveals a pattern of discipleship for us: walk and talk together with others in caring community; honestly share your heart and life story; invite Jesus in; see Jesus afresh in worship and the community of faith; go and tell the good news of Jesus. ***What would your life like look like if it centred on these rhythms of grace? What would our church be like? What would our meals look like?***

The word “companion” literally means “to share bread”. Cleopas and his friend are companions and Jesus joins them on the road and the meal. ***Who are your companions on this journey of faith? Who might need your companionship?***

How could you welcome Jesus at every meal? Since we eat normally 3 times a day, how could you use these 1095 meal times each year to God’s glory and to better serve Jesus’ mission in the world?

What can I learn from Jesus here and put into practice in my own life?

Praying it into action and everyday living...

*I perceived that there is nothing better for [human beings] than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that **everyone should eat and drink** and take pleasure in all his toil — this is God's gift to humanity (Ecclesiastes).*

Everything else—creation, redemption, mission—is “for” this: that we might eat together in the presence of God. God created the world so that we might eat with him. The food we consume, the table around which we sit, and the companions gathered with us have as their end our communion with one another and with God. The Israelites were redeemed to eat with God on the mountain, and we're redeemed for the great messianic banquet that we anticipate when we eat together as a Christian community. We proclaim Christ in mission so that others might hear the invitation to join the feast. Creation, redemption, and mission all exist so that this meal can take place.

Tim Chester, A Meal with Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community, and Mission around the Table .