

## 5. Feeding the Body of Christ: The Eucharist

### Bible Passages:

#### Luke 14:1 & 7-24

<sup>1</sup> One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched.

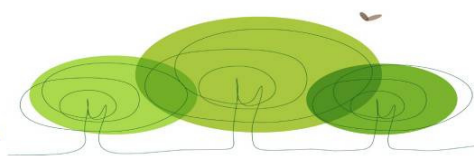
<sup>7</sup> When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honour at the table, he told them this parable: <sup>8</sup> “When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honour, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. <sup>9</sup> If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give this person your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. <sup>10</sup> But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up to a better place.’ Then you will be honoured in the presence of all the other guests. <sup>11</sup> For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

<sup>12</sup> Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. <sup>13</sup> But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, <sup>14</sup> and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

<sup>15</sup> When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, “Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.” <sup>16</sup> Jesus replied: “A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. <sup>17</sup> At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’ <sup>18</sup> “But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, ‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.’ <sup>19</sup> “Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’ <sup>20</sup> “Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’ <sup>21</sup> “The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’ <sup>22</sup> “‘Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’ <sup>23</sup> “Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. <sup>24</sup> I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.’”

#### 1 Corinthians 12: 12-27

<sup>12</sup> Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. <sup>13</sup> For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body - whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free - and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. <sup>14</sup> Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. <sup>15</sup> Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. <sup>16</sup> And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. <sup>17</sup> If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? <sup>18</sup> But in fact God



has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. <sup>19</sup> If they were all one part, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup> As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

<sup>21</sup> The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" <sup>22</sup> On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, <sup>23</sup> and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, <sup>24</sup> while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it, <sup>25</sup> so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. <sup>26</sup> If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it. <sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

### Summary:

Eating is central, both in the Eucharist / Holy Communion and to Jesus' pictures of God's Kingdom as the heavenly banquet. All our eating today – around the 'Lord's table' and around our own tables, should reflect and anticipate the values of God's coming Kingdom. The values that unite Eucharist and Banquet include

- ✓ Eating together – with others, with strangers, with those who produce food
- ✓ Eating well – quality and ethics in eucharist and all our meals
- ✓ Eating with Jesus – both in terms of presence and values
- ✓ Eating in anticipation – of God's coming Kingdom

### Introduction:

"Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God." Luke 14:15

If, as Ludwig Feuerbach famously said: "You are what you eat", what does that say about you? Does that make you cheap junk, or beautifully prepared, fresh and intriguing, and deeply satisfying?

How central is food in your life? Is it simply part of the routine – fuel you grab to get you through the day? Or is food what your day revolves around? Food can be what makes us come alive as people – making us stop and appreciate our senses, connect with our createdness, spend time with others, develop a sense of gratitude to our Creator and Sustainer.

Today, as we conclude our series on food, we're going to look at the very heart of the Christian faith. And eating food together is at the very heart of the Christian faith! Jesus commanded his followers to break bread and drink wine whenever they met together, in order to remember him and the sacrifice of his life for the sins of the world. Whatever we call it (Holy Communion, Mass, Lord's Supper, Eucharist), the special meal that Jesus inaugurated is central to what it means to be the people of God.

In addition, the most frequent image that Jesus used of our future destiny – the fullness of the Kingdom of God – is a banquet or even a wedding feast – a celebration meal enjoyed together



where all are invited to share around a common table.

These two images – the Eucharist and the Banquet – are going to shape our thinking as we conclude this series on food. One is a foretaste of the Kingdom, and the other describes the fullness of God’s Kingdom. One is a reality we are to put into practice not just in church but whenever we eat and drink. The other is a vision to inspire us in how we relate to food, relate to others, relate to the world and relate to God. The Eucharist and the Banquet are both food for the imagination and also food for the journey.

So what are the marks of these two central meals – the Eucharist and the Banquet?

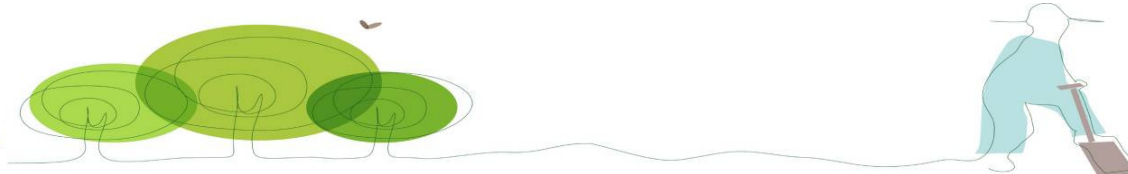
## 1. Eating Together

You cannot celebrate Holy Communion alone - only where at least two or three are gathered. The very name communion is about sharing with others, as well as with God. Similarly, there is no such thing as a solo banquet! Take-away supermarket dinners may offer ‘banquet for one’ but it is really a contradiction in terms. If you sit stuffing your face with food on your own you simply can’t enjoy it as much as when there are others to share it with! So, both the Lord’s table and the Kingdom Banquet are fundamentally about eating together.

So if the heart of our faith is about eating together, who do we eat with? In the story that Jesus tells in Luke 14 it’s clear that our fellow guests at God’s table may take us by surprise. This is no polite dinner party where guests are carefully vetted for their ability to make conversation and not to cause an embarrassment. Here people are rounded up from the highways and the byways – the Big Issue sellers, the drug addicts and alcoholics, the unemployed and unemployable, the people who ask awkward questions and eat in an embarrassing way. We need to ask what this says to us about how we celebrate the Eucharist – and about how we eat together as a Church or at home? Are outsiders welcome? Do we give special places to some or is there equality around the common table?

In some Jewish families there is a tradition at Passover of setting an extra place for the prophet Elijah. Similarly, Polish Christians leave an extra place for the unexpected guest at Christmas. And of course we are told in the Bible that some have entertained angels without realising it at the time. There is something significant about eating together – not as a closed circle, but always open to the newcomer, the unexpected guest who may be an angel, or perhaps even Jesus in disguise. Are our homes ... and our churches ... places of hospitality and welcome and shared food? Or are they places that exclude?

On a wider scale, the American theologian John Howard Yoder calls the Eucharist the basis of a new ‘community of consumption,’ as it symbolically challenges the disconnected nature of our global food production. It is not only about those physically sat around the table, but about those the food links us to. In one sense there should be a sense of ‘holy communion’ at every meal we eat – not only with God and our fellow consumers, but of communion with each of the people and animals and places that played a part in bringing that meal together. Unless we know the story of the food we eat and the links along the line to those who produce it, we cannot truly experience that ‘holy communion’ – that community of consumption. After all, we can be sure



that the heavenly banquet is one where no human being will be exploited, where creation and creatures will be respected and nurtured. If that is the vision that inspires us, then surely it should be one we seek to put into practice now in how and what we eat – whether in church or at home?

## 2. Eating well

Brother Sam, who leads the Anglican Franciscan order in England, talks about the importance of the bread we use in the Eucharist: “What seems to me to be important is that the bread that we use is good bread! Not the cheapest, most industrially produced, chemically-filled bread which just comes off a production line and is sold as a loss-leader at the supermarket, but using the best materials, where the food has been produced justly, where we know where it comes from, where we have a mind as to how far the wheat, the grain, has travelled and how it’s been produced ... I think it does matter what we eat, and it does matter what we use to celebrate the goodness and the mercy and the forgiveness of God in the Eucharist.”

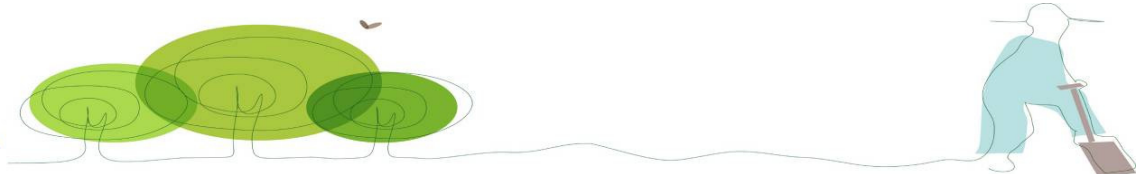
At the Franciscan Friary where Brother Sam is based, at Hilfield in Dorset, they get their bread flour from local organic farms, ground at a water-mill that has been on the same site since Domesday Book, and they bake it themselves. Now, of course, most of us don’t live somewhere where all of that is possible, but even so, what can we do to celebrate all that is good and wholesome about God’s creation represented in the bread and wine we use in the Eucharist? These are meant to be the fruits of the earth and gifts of God’s creation – not the cheapest processed products of an inhumane industrialised food system. Perhaps there are members of the congregation who would love to bake an organic loaf for communion on a regular basis?

As Professor Michael Northcott says “the consumption of cheap industrialised food by Christians is contradictory to the act of economic sharing that Eucharist represents in Christian worship”. As we think about food – both in church and in our homes – what does this say to us? What is our global version of the banqueting table that Jesus speaks about? Who is sitting at the table and who is excluded? Who is at the head and who has the best seats? Who do we not allow to be at the table at all or to scabble about for crumbs at our feet? Who would we like to invite and what would we choose to serve?

Eating well is not just about high-quality ingredients, and about enough food to satisfy our needs – although both those are good and valuable. It is ultimately also about well-being – eating in a way that reflects God’s Kingdom values of justice and peace for all people and for all creation. It is about eating with a clear conscience.

## 3. Eating with Jesus

Jesus said ‘Do this in remembrance of me’ as he shared the bread and the wine at the Last Supper. Perhaps we need to be more conscious of eating with Jesus, certainly as we gather around the holy table for communion, but also as we eat all our meals – at home and at work and as we eat out, as well as in how we eat at church. Are there ways in which we can make every meal table a ‘holy table’?



Of course saying grace is one way to do that – to deliberately, consciously thank God for what we are about to eat, and to invite Jesus to be the unseen guest at our table. After all the very word ‘eucharist’ comes from the Greek word for thanksgiving – we are to eat with a conscious sense of thankfulness to God for his abundant grace and provision.

As well as that, maybe we can ask what it means to eat with Jesus in terms of the menu we eat, in terms of the company we keep, in terms of the conversation we hold. We learn from Colossians 1:16-17 that Jesus is the one for whom all things were made, and in whom all things hold together – and that includes the food we eat.

Perhaps we can adapt the mantra ‘What Would Jesus Do?’ as we do our food-shopping and ask ‘What Would Jesus Eat?’ as we face those difficult shopping choices. If the chickens, pigs and cows were made by and for Jesus, and if our Heavenly Father notices even when sparrows fall to the ground, then it matters to Jesus how they lived and whether they have been treated well. If meadows and rivers - and whole ecosystems - are held together in Jesus, then farming that encourages their health and thriving is a spiritual concern not just an ecological one. If our greed and wastefulness means that others are going hungry, or are being exploited, or that creation is groaning – then are we really eating with Jesus?

When we come to receive bread and wine at the Eucharist, we are encouraged to examine our hearts and repent of our sins, as we remember the cost of the sacrifice that Jesus bore on the cross. That cost includes our sins of greed, waste and carelessness towards the food God gives us through his creation. Therefore there may need to be a sense of repentance as we receive the bread and the wine, and we may need to ask for God’s spirit to help transform our attitudes and our practices in terms of food.

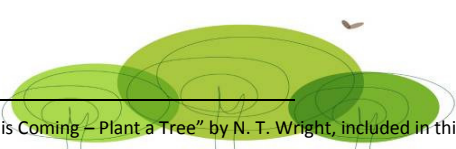
#### **4. Eating in Anticipation**

The Jewish Passover meal, which of course lies behind our Christian communion service, is always eaten with the people packed and ready to depart. It looks back to the first Passover in Egypt and the need to be ready to escape from slavery into the Promised Land.

Our meals should also have a sense of anticipation about them – not of being ready to leave, but of waiting eagerly for what is to come – the eventual fullness of God’s Kingdom when Jesus returns.

Bishop Tom Wright says: ““In the new creation the ancient human mandate to look after the garden is dramatically reaffirmed. The resurrection of Jesus is the reaffirmation of the goodness of creation, and the gift of the Spirit is there to make us the fully human beings we were supposed to be, precisely so that we can fulfill that mandate at last. What are we waiting for?”<sup>1</sup>

If Jesus’ resurrection reaffirms the goodness of creation, then the way we eat, and the way we produce our food, and share our food – should reflect creation’s goodness too – and should anticipate the fullness of God’s kingdom when Jesus returns. On more than one occasion Jesus talks about the Kingdom as a wedding feast and of being ready and waiting for the bridegroom to appear. So, perhaps our meals today – both in church and elsewhere, can be foretastes of the



heavenly banquet. As we eat together we can begin to bring the Kingdom of God to life here and now, in what we eat and how it has been produced, in who we eat with, and in the time we take over meals.

If it is true that ‘we are what we eat’ in a biological sense, perhaps it can also be true that we become how we eat – that the way we eat, the values that go into the food and the relationships around and behind the table – help form who we are as persons and as a community. Meal-times can be the most sacred times in our life, as we anticipate and begin to become a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. Of course ‘sacred’ in biblical terms need not mean solemn or pious! The gospels are full of stories of Jesus sharing meals that were anything but conventionally religious. They were full of overflowing quantities of good wine, they were interrupted by a prostitute pouring perfume on his feet, they mixed together tax collectors, sinners and Pharisees. These meals that Jesus ate were celebrations of the coming Kingdom. Ours can be too – if we recover that vision.

Just before Jesus told the story of the heavenly banquet in Luke 14, one of those with him said: “Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.” As we eat together - together with the poor and with our global family; as we eat well – in terms of quality, quantity and conscience; as we eat with Jesus consciously in our midst, and as we eat in anticipation of the greater feast that is to come, we begin to taste that blessing and we invite others to share in the goodness of God. Taste and see that the Lord is good!

**Watch:** “Feeding the Body of Christ”

Five minute Video with Professor Michael Northcott, Brother Sam and Rev Alex Smeed

