

Exploring Meals in the Bible



A series of eight studies

Introduction

A number of recent experiences have encouraged me to explore the centrality of meals in the Bible.

Last Sunday was the final gathering of Junior Church before the summer holidays. We had a party in the meadow of Bishopscroft and the children were asked about meals and parties that Jesus had with different people.

As you know, I have recently got back from covering the initial ten weeks of an interregnum at St Christopher's in Bahrain. As well as leading worship and conducting eight weddings, much of my time was spent having meals with people, sometimes in homes, at others in one of the many simple restaurants catering for the very international community there. It was an opportunity for me to catch up with the journeys of peoples' lives.

And we have recently had a week's holiday with our family, a rare event for all of us to be together in one place, but again meals were a memorable part of that holiday.

When we lived and served in Hong Kong in the 1980's, I was responsible for organizing a programme of weekly lunchtime Bible expositions at St John's Cathedral. I remember one series title vividly. It was led by a Chinese priest: *'The Essence of Christianity is Eating.'* Perhaps that is a distinctively Chinese insight, food being so central to Chinese life, but it wasn't just the food that he highlighted, but what meals do to foster deeper relationships.

Today I read another example of that from Mennonite House, an interracial social service project in Atlanta, Georgia in the early 1960's. The lady involved in running this important centre remembered her mother's example *'providing spaces of refuge in the midst of struggle, spaces of joy, and laughter, good food and kind words.'*

So, I hope that as we explore some Bible meals together, we might reflect on the deeper meaning and experience of those meals. When we come to the New Testament, we will be drawing heavily on the insights of Eddie Askew, formerly International Director of the Leprosy Mission, in his book *Cross Purposes*, meditations and prayers based on meals with Jesus.

Chris Butt
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Opening Prayer

**For food in a world where many walk in hunger;
For faith in a world where many walk in fear;
For friends in a world where many walk alone;
We give you thanks, O Lord.**

Exploring Meals in the Bible

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Session 7: The Meal that Never Was - in Emmaus.

Session 8: Breakfast on the Beach – New Beginnings.

Introductory Session 1 – The Importance of Meals

Opening Prayer

1. Think of special meals that you have shared with others. What made the meal so special for you?
2. Why do you think that whenever someone leaves your workplace or church community, we think of organizing a meal?
3. *Companion* comes Old French *compaignon*, literally 'one who breaks bread with another'. Think of examples of how meals together have begun and deepened a companionship or friendship with one another and share your experience with the group.
4. *Hospitality* comes from the same root as hospital and hospice; it has a sense of making your guests feel at home. What are the elements that enable you to feel 'at home' when you visit someone's home? You might like to reflect on the HM Bateman cartoon (on the reverse side!)
5. I remember reading of the changing life of a family from sitting down together at the dining table, enjoying a meal together; to each person sitting in front of the television with a meal on a tray; to each person with a tray, but in their own room with their own individual screen, each one watching something different. Or have you been out to a restaurant and everyone on the table is looking at their phone? Technology, of course, is certainly not all negative and often links people together, but how can family life and friendships be deepened in our contemporary world.
6. What meals can you remember in the Bible?
7. When the Chinese Priest in Hong Kong chose a title for the series of studies on meals in the Bible, he selected '*The*

Essence of Christianity is Eating.' What do you think that he meant by that? Do you agree with him?

8. Read Isaiah 55: 1-5 and reflect on the invitation to come and enjoy a great banquet. What is so special about this meal? And what does it symbolize for you?

Final Reflection and Prayer



Session 2: The Passover – Storytelling and Remembering



Bible Reading: Exodus 12: 1-17

1. Think of a meal when you have dined with a great storyteller. What was memorable for you? Have you enjoyed playing charades after a meal? How was the Passover story enacted in family homes in the years that followed?
2. *'Passover is the master story of the Jewish people going from degradation to redemption, and it mirrors our own personal journeys.'* (Rabbi Rick Jacobs).

'Each person that night is meant to see himself or herself as if they personally had just been liberated.' (Jonathan Sacks)

How do you think the annual celebration of Passover in families shaped the Jewish understanding and expectation as a people?

3. *'It took one day to take the Israelites out of Egypt. It took forty years to take Egypt out of the Israelites.'* (Jonathan Sacks) Why do you think this is so and what are the ways in which the Israelites learnt to leave Egypt behind to find a new freedom?
4. Jewish festivals were clearly of deep importance for Christians in understanding our faith. Two of the most important events in Christianity occurred at Christian festivals: Jesus' death at Passover – the Last Supper may well have been a Passover meal and in John's Gospel the timing of Jesus' death occurs at the time of sacrifice of the Passover lambs; and the coming of the Holy Spirit occurs at Pentecost. How do you think understanding our continuity with our Jewish heritage helps enrich and throws new light on our own faith as Christians?

Final Reflection and prayer

May the good tidings of redemption soon be heard in every land. May those who hunger for freedom and justice be satisfied, and may all people be blessed with the joys of harmony. We rejoice now in the memory of our deliverance from bondage, and we celebrate the goodness we have known through the ages.

Session 3: Something to Celebrate



Opening Prayer

Bible Readings: Luke 5:27-32 and Matthew 9:9

Setting the Scene – from *Cross Purposes* by Eddie Askew

1. What do we know about tax-collectors in first century Palestine? What does Jesus' readiness to sit and eat with tax-collectors '*and other sinners*' tell us of the nature of Jesus' ministry?
2. What was it that Matthew saw in Jesus that he was willing to leave all and follow him? How different was the way Jesus treated him from his experience with other religious leaders?
3. Reflect on the invitation of Jesus to Matthew and the experience of the Israelites in Egypt, that Moses reminds them of in Deuteronomy 7:7. What are the experiences in common?

4. *The 'righteous' people, the Pharisees and teachers of the Law stayed outside in a flurry of ruffled feathers.* (Eddie Askew). They never got to eat with Jesus. Think what they missed! They failed to be healers in their society. How do we avoid acting in the same way?
5. *'We need the courage to accept that we are accepted in spite of being unacceptable'* (Paul Tillich) How does Matthew's life reflect that?

Final Reflection and Prayer

LOVE bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lack'd anything.

'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here:'
Love said, 'You shall be he.'
'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
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,' says Love, 'Who bore the blame?'
'My dear, then I will serve.'
'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat.'
So I did sit and eat.

George Herbert (1593-1632)

Session 4: Picnic on the Grass



Opening Prayer

Bible Readings: Mark 6: 30-34 and John 6: 30-34

Setting the Scene – from *Cross Purposes* by Eddie Askew

1. Think of occasions when you have been exhausted, strained to the limits, and in need of time alone, a quiet place, space to reflect, time to be refreshed. Can you share such an experience with the group? How is Jesus' care for his disciples shown? (6:30-31)
2. Imagine the feelings of the disciples on reaching the other side of the lake and finding crowds of people there. How would you have responded? What are the disciples' response and contrast that with Jesus?
3. How does Andrew react? How is it different from the other disciples? Andrew made a habit of bringing people to Jesus (John 1:41; 12: 22) as well as this youngster.
4. Think about the boy in the story whose mother had no doubt packed his picnic lunch. How do you think he felt

offering his lunch to Jesus? It was his readiness that made the feeding possible. In what ways can God use and multiply our gifts however small and insignificant they seem?

5. *'The real miracle is not when God intervenes in our world to do the things we ask him to do, but when we begin to do the things he asks us to do.'* (Eddie Askew)

Final Reflection and Prayer

Lord, take the little that I can give.
At times I hesitate
to offer at all
my talent seems so small.
But if my loaves and fish can be of use
I offer them with joy.
Please take them,
and in your creative love
transform both them and me.

Forgive me Lord for limiting your miracles,
confining them to those occasions
when you seem to intervene specifically at my request.

And Lord, as you wait patiently for me to recognize your
hand at work in every minute of my day
prod me a little, shake me from my complacency, and
help me to start to live the miracle of obedience.

Session 5: Dinner in Bethany



Opening Prayer

Bible Readings: Luke 10: 38-42 and John 12: 1-3

Setting the Scene – from *Cross Purposes* by Eddie Askew and *The Fount Children's Bible* retold by Andrew Knowles.

1. The home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus was a place Jesus treasured. John 11: 5 tells us Jesus loves this trio. He felt among friends and being near, but not in Jerusalem, it was a place that he could relax. Whose homes have been important to you in your life's journey and why?
2. Hospitality was important especially in a Middle Eastern context and hospitality meant food for the guests. Martha was taking the conventional role as a hostess, busy preparing food, showing her love in practical ways. Mary was the unconventional sister, wanting to be near Jesus, to listen to him even if it meant neglecting the traditional customs. Who do you identify with most in

the story? Are there occasions when you think simpler might have been better?

3. Jesus commended Mary for sitting and listening. Are there occasions when you have felt that sitting and listening was more important than being busy doing? Have you ever felt the desire to be released from doing, so that you could sit and listen?
4. In the middle of the meal Mary took a bottle of very expensive perfume and anointed Jesus' feet. How does Jesus interpret what she has done? And how does that compare with Mary's critics, notably Judas Iscariot? If you want a gift to show your love, it must be costly (not necessarily in monetary value). In what ways was Mary's actions costly?
5. Mary then wipes Jesus' feet with her hair, a deeply intimate action. What does it express of her relationship with Jesus?

Final Reflection and prayer

My hands are empty, Lord,
But as I stand in front of you
at least I'll offer you
my yearning,
and hope that
as I offer it in love,
in love you'll take it
and add a fragrance of your own.

Session 6: Supper in Jerusalem



Opening Prayer

Bible Readings: John 13: 1-14 and Luke 22: 24-26

Setting the Scene – from *Cross Purposes* by Eddie Askew

1. The setting of this meal in Jerusalem is within the Passover festival (in John, perhaps Passover Eve) What are the sorts of things that would have been running through the disciples' minds as they come together for this meal?
2. How did the disciples view themselves as they looked forward to the coming kingdom that they saw Jesus coming to establish?
3. How does Jesus teach and show that the Kingdom is very different from the disciples' expectations?
4. Imagine that you are one of the disciples sitting round the table. How would you have felt as Jesus approaches you with a bowl of water and towel? Do you sympathise with the reaction of Peter?

5. Here is some advice from one pastor to others about a Maundy Thursday service: *Instruct them to come to the service with clean feet in clean footgear. When Jesus did the foot-washing, the disciples' feet were already clean, because a servant would have washed them when they arrived. Therefore, there is no soap and no scrubbing. If the climate is warm enough in your area that people might hit on the idea of wearing open sandals, you might want to discourage them from doing it. Although it is very biblical to wear open sandals, it isn't very edifying for the person doing the foot-washing. Do you think he has totally missed the point?!*
6. John surprisingly does not include the breaking of bread and sharing of wine in this meal, the origins of our Holy Communion, but how do Jesus' actions and teaching in John 13 throw light on our understanding of Holy Communion?

Final Reflection and Prayer

Read Philipp. 2: 1-11 in the light of Jesus' actions in John 13. There in the upper room, the tension must have been almost too much to bear. A chance for them to comprehend the height and depth and length and breadth of love. A chance elbowed aside, pushed down and trampled in the rush to take advantage. The temple of your presence transformed into a market place, where love was at a discount traded for power.

Lord, let me learn from them and my own mistakes. And let me learn from you that love can never grasp for privilege except the privilege of standing back and giving way.

Session 7: The Meal that Never Was



Opening Prayer

Bible Readings: Luke 24:13-19, 28-33

Setting the Scene – from *Cross Purposes* by Eddie Askew

1. The couple in this story, Cleopas and one other (perhaps Mrs Cleopas?) reach their home village and with true Middle Eastern hospitality invite the stranger in for a meal and to stay with them. Have you had the experience of offering strangers hospitality or unexpectedly receiving hospitality from a stranger? Share the experience in the group.
2. Thinking of the resurrection appearances, so often the disciples do not recognize Jesus at first, but then when they do recognize him, he disappears. Think of other occasions when this happens; why do you think this might be so?

3. How do the disciples recognize that it is Jesus among them and what has prepared them for this new reality? Think back to the seven-mile journey from Jerusalem. How had their perspectives changed on the way? What was it that enabled their perspectives to change?
4. The account recalls two journeys: from Jerusalem to Emmaus and then the return journey from Emmaus back to Jerusalem. Describe with adjectives the two journeys and what makes all the difference?
5. Should the dawning reality of Jesus' resurrection make a difference to the journeys of our lives? When we feel downhearted and discouraged, how might we have our perspectives changed or renewed?
6. Mother Julian of Norwich (1343-c1416) wrote of Jesus' '*exquisite courtesy*'. How have we experienced courtesy in others and how do you see courtesy expressed in this story?

Final Reflection and prayer

I realize your love is such
you'll never force yourself into my life.
The choice is mine. I'm free to open or to close the door
and when I do – close it I mean – and you move on,
I know you will be back patient beyond belief
to wait again until I choose to ask you in and eat with me.
And then the bread and wine
take on greater significance
than I've ever known.

Session 8: Breakfast on the Beach



Opening Prayer

Bible Readings: John 21: 1-17

Setting the Scene – from *Cross Purposes* by Eddie Askew

1. Put yourselves in the shoes of the fishermen disciples and recall the experiences of these past days. How tempted might you be to go back to the familiar, to your old job, fishing on Lake Tiberias (or Galilee)? What are the results? What might have been their thoughts as they looked back over the previous three years? What might their Galilean neighbours have said?
2. How would they have felt after a night not catching a single fish?
3. In the early morning light, a stranger calls out to them. How would you have felt about his instructions? What

might you have said (perhaps under your breath)? What echoes might there have been of a similar occasion?

4. If this was the beach where Peter and the other fishermen disciples were first called, following an amazing catch of fish, how has their life's experiences changed them as they hear Jesus' fresh call on their lives?
5. Jesus provides a simple, but memorable, breakfast, having no doubt built the fire and gutted the fish. What does this tell us of the nature of his ministry and his calling of us as disciples? For Peter what memories might the charcoal fire have rekindled?

Final Reflection and Prayer

*The risen Jesus is new life for all of us. He is the sunrise.
He is the morning. He is breakfast! (Andrew Knowles)*

Your morning presence reassures.

Your love glows warmer than the fire, chases the chill.

Tells me that what's behind

can stay that way.

That memory will never come between your face and mine.

In offering me the bread and fish

the past's wiped out,

the present precious,

the future in your kingdom.

Life can begin again,

the taste of love more than a memory.