

MEALS WITH JESUS

An Introduction

ANTICIPATING THE KINGDOM

We began 2016 encouraging one another to be a people of anticipation. To be a people who live out the hope with we have known and experienced in Jesus. In fact, the meaning of anticipate is to enjoy a foretaste, to experience in some part that which is to come. Thus a very practical way God has designed us humans to anticipate, to “taste and see that that Lord is good”, is by eating together!

For many of us today, the significance of a meal may not be as visceral as it was for many humans throughout history and those in many other cultures still today. Two reasons for that.

- 1) Our culture does not exalt that long drawn out family dinner as normative. We eat to sustain energy as we fill the gap between activities. Most of our days do not end with a shared meal, but rather with an isolated activity –whether watching tv, reading or putting down the kids. Now, some of that is due to the extended day with electricity, but nonetheless, meals tend to be gap fillers and not primary organizers of family time.
- 2) We are abundant eaters. One scholar notes, “Some of us, quite frankly, eat a greater quantity and better quality of food on a regular basis than all but the very richest people in the biblical cultures, even at their special feasts.”¹

The abundance of food for us, makes it especially hard for us to identify with the hope and sustaining excitement of being led into a land flowing with “milk and honey”, to have a promise of a great banquet as the culmination of all redeemed history. For most humans in history and for many still today, the promise of food and the hope for anxiety free food provision is hope that drives them, stirs them deep within.

For just a few moments, lets try and place ourselves in the context of our faith family, and many around the world today, whose daily calendar centers around a shared meal and who appreciate the difficulty of attaining basic food, much less a plethora of choices. If we can do that for just a moment, we can understand why the Kingdom of God is often pictured through food!

¹ Blomberg, Craig L. *Contagious Holiness: Jesus' meals with sinners*. New Studies in Biblical Theology, vol. 19. (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 169.

Again, the promise of God to Moses for God's people was to rescue them from slavery and journey with them to a land of overflowing with "milk and honey" (Ex. 7-8). God commanded Israel to remember his salvation, mercy, justice and promise through a meal called the Passover (Ex. 12-13). Later the Lord establishes feasts and festivals for remembering who he is and what he has done to be the normative pattern for Israel's life together; especially that of the Passover meal (Ex. 23 & 34).

Our faith family's hope was not merely salvation from oppression and destruction but where all experienced abundance of life. This expectation marked them throughout as the prophet Isaiah helps us see in chapters 25 and 55

"On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all people a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken." (25:6-8)

"Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price...Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear that your soul may live; and I will make you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David." (55:1-4)

Thus, as one author notes, meals for our early faith family from everyday dinners to festivals and feasts, come to "...appear as signs of a properly functioning life according to the ground rules of the Mosaic Law...and as a foretaste of 'Paradise' both in this age and in the age to come."²

Meals are way of anticipating, for experiencing the restored order of God's rule and reign, of tasting what eternity will be like when work is not oppressive and our search for food is not a fight; when all that is broken has been made right!

² Ibid. 64.

A WAY OF DISTINCTION

Meals in the Old Testament had a way of anticipating the Kingdom of God in its restored abundance, but they also had a way of drawing boundaries, making distinctions. “Only those who in some sense belonged were included; the total outsider was not welcome.”³

This “boundary setting” was elevated in between the Old and New Testaments. It is important for us to see why. As one scholar notes,

“Even more so than in the Old Testament, intertestamental Judaism, viewed meal times as important occasions for drawing boundaries. Dinning created an intimate setting in which one nurtured friendship with the right kind of people, eating the right kind of food...Fundamental...was the notion that unclean people and objects constantly threatened to corrupt God’s holy, elect nation and individuals within it. Like physical disease, we may think of ritual impurity as contagious.”⁴

So, when our faith family ate dinner, they did so in a certain manner, in a particular way with particular food for the purpose of being distinct. It was during this time that the term “breaking bread” began to surface, and if found in no other Greek references than in biblical Greek wording. “Breaking bread to begin a dinner formed an important responsibility for the father of home in Jesus circles, whereas it played no significant role in the Greco-Roman meal.”⁵ The normal every day meal became a smaller enactment of the identity shaping Passover meal, a way of Israel’s distinction in God’s plan for their salvation and ultimately all the worlds.

Meals were a time of anticipation and time of distinction for our faith family up until the time when Jesus entered the world as baby in a manger. They were meant to picture the kingdom of God in a tangible way and make explicit those who were a part of the kingdom and those who were not. The beauty of anticipation was clouded with a fear of corruption, a fear that stemmed from many of their own experiences of becoming “like the world” they inhabited over the world that would be.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. 93-94.

⁵ Ibid. 94.

FLIPPING WORLDS

Jesus enters this world of expectation and distinction, of hope and fear and even hatred. And, as a Jew, we would expect for him to follow the same categories of his forefathers, to see the meal as an anticipation for the Kingdom and a way of creating distinction with the world in which he currently inhabits. And he does! But not in the way that those who were waiting on God to redeem recognized.

Here is what I mean. Jesus claimed to be the “Son of Man” (Mk. 10:45; Lk. 19:10, 7:34), a term from the book of Daniel for the Messiah, the one to come who would be given authority to establish and rule over God’s Kingdom; the entire world (Dan. 7). So, as the Ruler of all the universe, what we expect would be his purposes and means for entering the earth?

One author puts it this way,

“How would you complete the sentence: ‘The Son of Man came....?’ The Son of Man came...preaching the Word...to establish the kingdom of God...to die on the cross.

Perhaps the question is more revealing if we make it, ‘We should go...?’ We should go...campaign for political change...preach on street corners...make the most of new media...adapt to the culture we want to reach.”⁶

Jesus actually answers the question in three ways,

“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’ (Mark 10:45); ‘The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost’ (Luke 19:10); ‘The Son of Man has come eating and drinking...’ (Luke 7:34).

The first two are statements of purpose. *Why* did Jesus come? He came to serve, to give his life as a ransom, to seek and to save the lost. The third is a statement of method. *How* did Jesus come? He came eating and drinking.”⁷

Specifically in Luke 7:34, Jesus says that,

“The Son of Man has come eating and drinking and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’”

One scholar, looking at all the meals of Jesus throughout the Gospels notes,

“...the unifying theme that emerges from the passages surveyed...is one that may be called ‘contagious holiness’. Jesus regularly associates with the various sorts of sinners on whom the most pious in his

⁶ Chester, Tim. *A Meal with Jesus: discovering grace, community & mission around the table.* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2011), 12.

⁷ Ibid.

culture frowned, but his association is never an end in itself. Implicitly or explicitly, he is calling people to change their ways and follow him as their master...he does not assume that he will be defiled by associating with the corrupt people [of which the religious would be shown to be the most corrupt!]. Rather, his purity can rub off on them and change them for the better. Cleanliness, he believes, is even more 'catching' than uncleanness; morality more influential than immorality."⁸

Thus it can be said that Jesus,

"...did evangelism and discipleship around the table with some grilled fish, a loaf of bread, and a pitcher of wine...

...This is why eating and drinking were so important in the mission of Jesus: they were a sign of friendship with tax collectors and sinners. His 'excess' of food and 'excess' of grace are linked. In the ministry of Jesus, meals were enacted grace, community and mission.

So the meals of Jesus represent something bigger. They represent a new world, a new kingdom, a new outlook. But they give that new reality substance. Jesus' meals are not just symbols; they're also application. They are not just pictures; they are the real thing in miniature. Food is stuff. It's not ideas. It's not theories. It's well, it's food, and you put it in your mouth, taste it, and eat it. And meals are more than food. They are social occasions. They represent friendship, community, and welcome."⁹

Similar to our faith family, Jesus too recognized that meals were means of anticipating the Kingdom, of enacting grace and community, of sharing in the now abundance of God as we taste a bit of what the full banquet will be!

And, similarly to our faith family, Jesus recognized that meals are opportunities for distinction. Yet, unlike our faith family whose distinction was driven more by fear—fear of their own limitations and fear of those different than them—Jesus' distinction is moved by a different power.

He understood, like his Father in Exodus when established the way for Himself to dwell with Israel (Ex. 20-31), that Holiness cannot be corrupted, but can consume. So, in the Spirit, he ate and drank with those whom were corrupted, those who were dirty, those who were outside the family of God and those inside the family! He ate with the sinner and the sick, which just happen to be everyone!

But he did so in a manner, a particular way that invited those into anticipation themselves. Into seeing their world and their perceived understanding of God's world flipped upside down!

⁸ Blomberg, 128.

⁹ Chester, 13-14.

WHY LUKE?

This upside down Kingdom that Jesus gives us to anticipate, is the reason we are going to be spending the next few months in the book of Luke.

“Luke contains more than twice as many references to Jesus’ feasting than any other Gospel or Gospel stratum...”¹⁰

Luke is littered with references to banquets, feasts, tables, those having abundance of food and those starved for food, and relined meals. Specifically, there are 9 meals with Jesus in Luke’s Gospel that we will concentrate on. Each helping us anticipate, enjoy a foretaste of God’s Kingdom now and forevermore.

My hope is that as we begin to see meals in the way Jesus say meals, as a central way to enact grace, community and mission, that our meals together in Gospel Community and throughout the week will be freed to a particular formative power in the Spirit.

As one pastor comments,

“We can make community and mission sound like specialized activities that belong to experts. Some people have a vested interest in doing this, because it makes them feel ‘extrodinary.’ Or we focus on the dynamic personalities who can hold an audience and lead a movement. Some push mission beyond the scope of ‘ordinary’ Christians. But the Son of Man came eating and drinking. It’s not complicated. True, it’s not always easy—it involves people invading your space or going to places where you don’t feel comfortable. But it’s not complicated. If you share a meal three or four times a week and you have a passion for Jesus, then you will be building up the Christian community and reaching out in mission.”¹¹

The key is time and passion for Jesus. Without passion for Jesus it is just a meal. Why church and mission are more than meals, because it requires us to be in the Spirit, passionately in love with Jesus and out of the overflow of our awe and wonder comes the fruit (Jn. 15 & Acts 2).

And that is why we end our time together and many of our meals together with the First Meal!

¹⁰ Blomberg, 164.

¹¹ Chester, 15-16.