

Centrepeace

- a meal table as the primary building block for church

THE UNIQUE TABLE

The provocative table

The story of Jesus sharing a meal at Simon the Pharisee's house highlights table-fellowship as crucial to his ministry and sets the scene for a central aspect of being church in the 21st century.

'One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he ... took his place at the table. A woman in the city, who was a sinner ... brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him - that she is a sinner." Jesus said to him, "Simon ... a certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five-hundred silver coins and the other fifty silver coins. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly. Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven ... your faith has saved you go in peace." (Lk 7:36-50)

Imagine ourselves as actually being there, sharing in the experience with the disciples and Jesus. The invitation to eat represents 'community' –'everyone around the same table'. Notice the variety of responses from people during the meal and the way in which they bring quite different encounters with the person of Jesus. Attitudes both open and close opportunities.

Reflect on the variety of feelings and emotions that must have been being expressed as the events unfolded; some were open and laid bare while many others were certainly stifled and repressed. This table is provocative. It is an opportunity for life-giving encounters while at the same time a place where truth reveals and is revealed. At the end of the story Jesus' blessing of "Peace!" to the woman is of course nothing less than the gift of the gospel.

Exercise:

- "Everyone remembers a significant meal!"
Share the memory in pairs or triplets and explain its significance to you

All this sets the focus for the Jesus-centered table to be the centerpiece of the living community.



The foundation meal

“The only physical thing Jesus leaves, with which to build the church – is a table!”¹

“The most inclusive image of the life, death, resurrection of Jesus -
is not a cross but a meal!”

It was at a table Jesus so often sat and engaged with people during his life. It was at a meal, following his ascension and the events of Pentecost, that his followers regularly remembered and re-encountered his crucifixion and victory over death. As we have already mentioned, one of the primary gifts Jesus gave the church² was the ‘Peacemeal’ - the gift of Breaking Bread.

Initially there are three central observations that we can make about this table that is so foundational to being the Christian community of faith. This Peacemeal is the:

▪ Table of Jesus

➤ Totally and entirely Christocentric:

- “I am the bread of life...” (Jn 6:35,51);
- “If anyone thirsts let them come to me and drink” (Jn 7:37-38);
- “This is my body ... this is my blood”.

▪ Table of Invitation

➤ Welcome from Jesus:

- He has prepared everything and invited us;
- ‘I have desired to eat this meal with you’ (Lk 22:15);
- ‘Come and have breakfast’ (Jn 21:12);
- ‘I will come in and eat with them’ (Rev 3:20);
- Moving towards the centre - different stages, different places.

▪ Table of Encounter

➤ Impact of Resurrection:

- ‘Known to them in the breaking of bread’ (Lk 24:35);
- ‘They knew it was the Lord’ (Jn 21:12);
- Encountering the resurrection / empowered by the Spirit;
- Something happens!

We shall develop these themes much further as our exploration unfolds and will build upon them with numerous other perspectives. The Peacemeal is like a ‘mirror ball’, suspended above a dance-floor, lights sparkling off its multitude of shining surfaces. The Peacemeal is like a rainbow with its millions of colour tones scattered from a single source of white light. As we explore Breaking Bread there are numerous different dimensions³ to the meal

¹ We are using the word ‘table’ here, not only with specific reference to food and eating a meal, but also as a symbol / metaphor of relationship and community that is expressed by it and flows from it

² Along with the Holy Spirit (cf Jn 20:22) and baptism (cf Mt 28:19)

³ The wide range of different points of focus and emphasis on Peacemeal that we will touch upon are simply aids to help us to begin to think through, just few of the probably innumerable themes and possibilities that this meal presents us with – they are not anything close to being complete! Ideally, it would be good to present them all, up-front, at the beginning of the session to provoke thinking about the big picture, but



each of which are significant in their own right yet also completely interconnected with all the other perspectives. Here is a simple meal exploding with infinite possibilities!

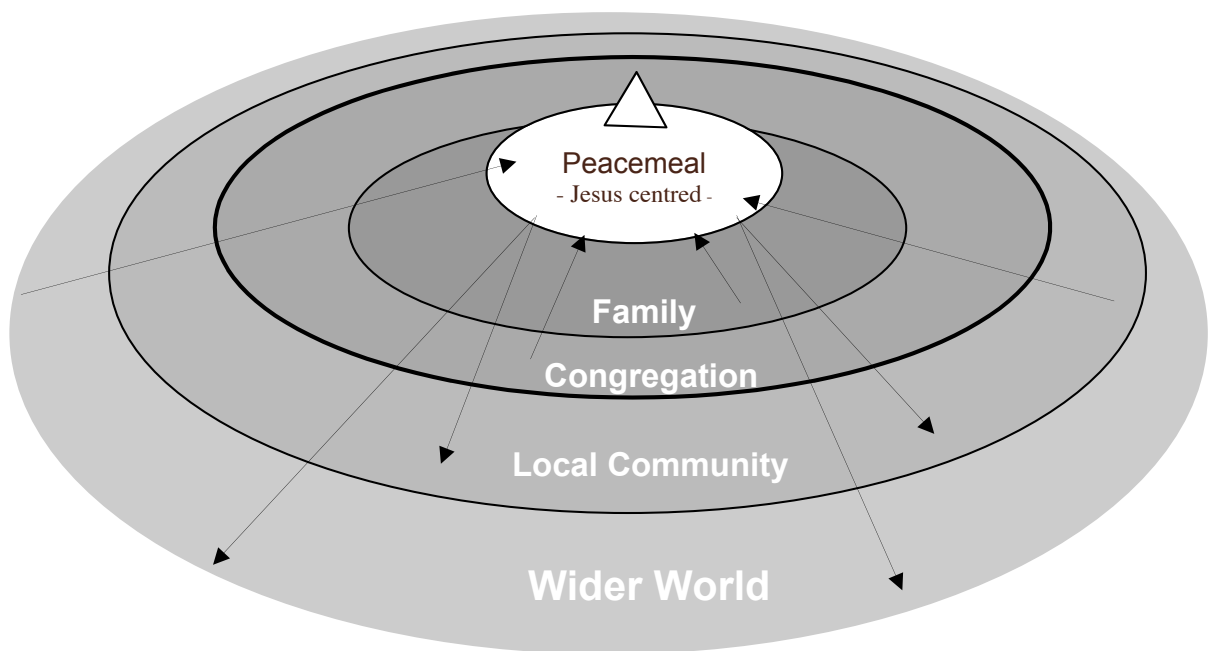
The central meal

Breaking bread is both the pivotal focus for understanding the gospel and the primary place for spiritual encounter:

- This table is the hub of worship for Christian disciples
- The Peacemeal is the centrepeace of the *shalom* community
- Like baptism, the Peacemeal links the transient (bread / water) with the eternal
- Here is the opportunity to explore and experiment creatively with breaking bread
- All God's truth is here, waiting to be discovered

The simplicity of this meal belies the awesome possibilities it presents.

This meal draws individuals and groups to its centre in the person of the risen Jesus. The consequence of this encounter energizes the participants and then sends them out into the wider world again to spread and share the truth encountered. This is a meal of both centering and scattering:



So for the church as community the table is central; it is both the centrepiece and the centrepeace. It is the axis around which all the rhythms that we have previously spoken about flow and move, all the times and tides of life. This table is:

- 'Centripetal' - people drawn in towards the centre
- 'Centrifugal' - people sent out from the centre

experience has shown that this is simply too overwhelming for most people; that is why we have placed them strategically at key points it throughout the session.



Exercise:

- “Why would Jesus choose a table and food as the centrepiece and foundation stone of being church?”

The vital meal

“What is the significance of food to human beings?”

There are of course many possible answers to this question, but clearly some of the most important are:

- It is essential / nutritional
- It is personal / psychological
- It is global / political
- It is communal / social / cultural
- It is ecological / creational
- It is spiritual / sacred ... and more ...?

However humble, ordinary, and even routine, there is something sacred about every meal. Along with fresh air, food and drink are the primary necessities for nurturing physical life, hence the archaic English word ‘victuals’⁴ for food and drink, literally meaning ‘the stuff of life’. So it should not surprise us that in Jesus it takes on whole new dimensions of understanding, expectation and experience.

In everyday experience even a solitary meal should be more than just refueling; it should also be a chance, however brief, to pause, rest and reflect – to take stock, to gather yourself, before moving on.

Food is life. Every meal we eat we should pause and remember that, “We are alive!” Life is a gift, and God provides the possibility of on-going daily life with the added gift of food:

“And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air,
and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life,
I have given every green plant for food.”
(Gen 1:30)

‘... the Lord had visited his people
and given them food.
(Ruth 1:6)

“And out of the ground the Lord God made to grow
every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food,
the tree of life also in the midst of the garden.”
(Gen 2:9)

‘(God) rained down upon them manna to eat,
and gave them the grain of heaven.’
(Ps 78:25)

⁴ From the Latin *victualis* - meaning, ‘related to (life) living’, see Chambers English Dictionary



Yet intertwined with the strength and satisfaction that enjoying this gift of food brings, it points to a dimension of life and being that is beyond what simply eating food can bring:

(God) humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna,
... (to) make you know that one does not live by bread alone,
(but) by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.
(Dt 8:3)

“For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.”
(LK 12:23)

“Do not labor for the food that perishes,
but for the food which endures to eternal life,
which the Son of man will give to you.”
(Jn 6:27)

The communal meal

In every human society the meal has been central to family and community with a significance that is both complex and profound. A place where resources and relationship are shared equally: there is celebration, story telling, tears and laughter and so much more. But it also has deep emotional and psychological importance, strengthening the sense of identity, security, belonging and wellbeing.

Human beings (*homo sapiens*) are unique within the animal world. They alone eat open-faced towards each other (as an expression of trust and inter-personal communication) and take the trouble to prepare food by cooking (rather than eating everything raw). Therefore the ‘hearth’ - which is both the cooking fire and the eating space - is the centre for this distinctive expression of community.

Added to this, humans are unique in their power of speech. Not simply in the ability to speak words and phrases, which a number of birds can do, but in ‘storytelling’.

These two unique characteristics⁵ both come together at the Peacemeal in its expression of community. A place where resources and relationship are shared equally: there is celebration, story telling, tears and laughter and so much more. But it also has deep emotional and psychological importance; strengthening the sense of identity, security, belonging and well-being:

“Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt
out of the house of slavery ...
Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread
and on the seventh day there shall be a festival to the Lord ...
Your shall tell your child on that day
“It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.”
(Ex 13:3,6,8)

⁵ For a socio-archaeological reflection on this theme see Martin Jones *‘Feast – Why Humans Share Food’* Oxford 2007



"Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine
and send portions to them for whom nothing is prepared;
for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved,
for the joy of the Lord is your strength."
(Neh 8:10)

Little wonder that infused by the creative energizing presence and power of the Spirit the meal takes on whole new dimensions of vitality in terms of Christian discipleship and destiny.

All of this makes it clear why Jesus chooses a table and food as the centrepiece and foundation stone of being church.

THE SIGNIFICANT TABLE

Many names

One of the first things to strike the observer of Breaking Bread is the variety of names that are used to describe this Christian experience. While these names can be used to stress the differences in belief and practice within the different church groups and denominations, they also provide another reminder of some of the rich dimensions that the Peacemeal⁶ presents us with. Here are some of the most frequently used terms of reference:

- **'Breaking Bread'**: this is the natural Hebrew way of speaking about a meal, usually supper. It is the most frequently used term in the New Testament (eg Acts 2:46; 20:7) and it stresses that it is a full meal to satisfy hunger as well as celebrating the life, death and resurrection of Jesus
- **'Eucharist'**: this comes from the Greek *eucharisteo*, 'to give thanks' and stresses the celebration and thanksgiving that is central to the meal. It originates with the eastern Orthodox church but is widely used among all Christian groups today
- **'The Lord's Supper'**: this is a term used in 1Cor 11:20 and emphasizes a meal focusing on the person of Jesus, and for many people this makes a connection with the events of the last supper; there is also a very similar reference in 1Cor 10:21 to 'the Lord's table'. Both refer to an ordinary meal with extraordinary focus and significance
- **'Communion'**: this is the word used in 1Cor 10:16 in the King James Version to translate the Gk: *koinonia* (sharing); it emphasises the deep fellowship and relationship with Jesus' and with others at the centre of this meal
- **'Agape'**: this is developed from the Greek word for 'love' and refers to the unique phrase 'love feast' in Jude 12; it emphasizes the fact that this is a meal (feast) in which the celebration of God's love, Jesus' love and shared love within the church is paramount
- **'The Mass'**: this is most widely used in the Roman Catholic tradition, and comes from the Latin *missio*, 'to dismiss' or 'to send'; some believe that it refers to the dismissal of catechumen (as yet unbaptised Christians) before the Eucharist was celebrated, others suggest the *missio* became synonymous with the 'blessing' and was linked with the

⁶ The very phrase 'Peacemeal' is yet another example of a name that gives further important focus to this meal.



consecration of the elements. A strong view links *missio* with the dismissal, the sending out', at the end of the celebration, "Go forth to love and serve the Lord!" This is a missionary meal

This meal is the demonstration of the total integration of the physical and spiritual, material and divine.

The complex meal

In its essence this meal is simplicity itself. At its heart is bread and wine with the rest of the food and shared experience finding their place around these points of reference. However, as you engage with the meal you begin to discover (as we have already begun to see) its incredible complexity. It is like a wonderful spiritual kaleidoscope. Much of it is wonderful and inspiring, but significant aspects are challenging and disturbing.

▪ Table of Disquiet

➤ Simply disturbing:

- Just bread and wine / inoffensive yet shocking
- 'Unless you chew the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood you have no life in you' (Jn 6:53)
- It is a "Vegetarian / vegan meal with cannibalistic overtones"!
- "This teaching is difficult, who can accept it? ... many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him" (Jn 6:60,66)

▪ Table of Enigma

➤ More than meets the eye:

- Simplicity is truth and truth is beauty
- Just bread and wine / could have been bread and water
- 'Serendipity' unexpected / surprising discovery by accident
- Raw materials to experiment with truth
- Often 'bread stale, wine flat' – constantly needs rediscovering
- A prism radiating the full rainbow spectrum of promise

The celebration meal

One of the hallmarks of the early Christian community was joy and celebration! ⁷ Jesus' victory and triumph on the cross brings rejoicing. The tomb is empty, "He is not here but is risen!" (Lk 24:5). This is 'Eucharist', this is thanks giving!

Jesus-people are party animals! One of the characteristics of the presence of *shalom* is not simply that people have enough to eat but that there is abundance ⁸ out of which to

⁷ Luke's gospel is filled with expressions of joy and rejoicing (eg 1:14,44,47; 10:21 as well as words for leaping for joy, laughter and merriment. The 'lost and found' parables in Ch 15 each conclude in rejoicing as does the story of Zacchaeus. The gospel begins and ends with rejoicing (1:47; 24:52-53). It is also the only gospel with the songs of praise Magnificat (1:46-55), Benedictus (1:68-79), Gloria (2:14) and Nunc Dimittis (2:29-32). The book of the Acts of the Apostles (same author?) continues in the same vein. Here we see the early Christian community full of joy and celebration! See D Guthrie '*New Testament Introduction*' IVP 1970 p 93

⁸ See the inference in PB Yoder '*Shalom: the Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice and Peace*' Faith and Life Press 1987 p 12



have a party! Clearly, Jesus, would never have been called a 'glutton and a wine bibber'⁹ for nothing. It is quite clear that he loved to party!

God clearly loves feasts, or there would not be so many commanded in the Bible! Frequently, feasts and celebrations are given as examples of God's extravagant grace:

"Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters;
and those who have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Hearken diligently to me,
and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in fatness."
(Isa 55:1-2)

'Then (Nehemiah) said to them,
"Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them,
to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord
... for the joy of the Lord is your strength."
(Neh 8:10)

'But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you ... 'A man once gave a great banquet, and invited many; and at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, "Come; for all is now ready." But they all alike began to make excuses... (So he said to his servant), "Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and maimed and blind and lame." And the servant said, "Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room." And the master said to the servant, "Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled."
(Lk 14:13-23)¹⁰

Food as celebration comes to a climax in biblical thought in the image of the 'Messianic eschatological banquet'. It fits in with the foundational idea of hope in scripture that, "The best is yet to come!"

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food,
a feast of well aged wines, of rich food full of marrow,
of well aged wines strained clear ...
He will swallow up death forever,
and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces
(Isa 25:6-8)

"I tell you, many will come from east and west
and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven."
(Mt 8:11)¹¹

⁹ See Mt 11:19; Lk 7:34

¹⁰ See also Mt 22:1-14

¹¹ Rev 19:9



At a meal Jesus was attending someone was heard to cry out:

“Oh the joy of eating bread in the kingdom of heaven”
(Lk 14:15)

In what we call the ‘Lord’s Prayer’¹² we are encouraged to say the words, “Give us today our daily bread”. The Greek word usually translated ‘daily’ is *epiousion* – it means ‘belonging to tomorrow’ and implies in this context ‘eschatological bread’.

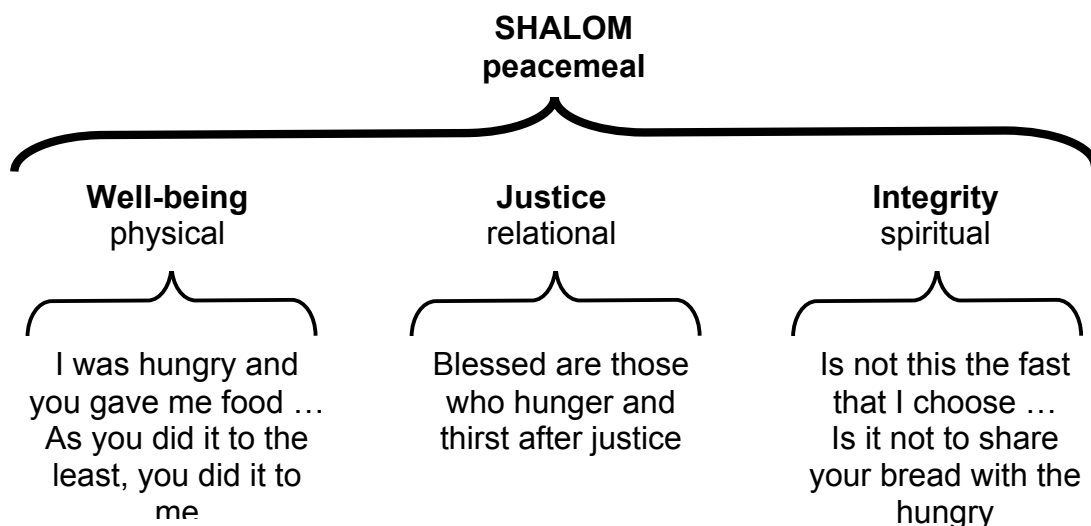
At the close of the ‘Last Supper’ Jesus tells the disciples that he will not celebrate like this *again*, “Until I eat / drink it new in the kingdom of my Father.”¹³ This *again* points to the eschatological banquet and sets the scene for our understanding of the peacemeal. It is party time!

The peace meal

A Christian understanding of ‘breaking bread’ is as a ‘peace meal’. This meal is centered on *shalom*. It draws every participant towards wholeness and completeness. Expressing the three essential characteristics of *shalom* the Peacemeal is a place where:

- Physical and material needs are met
- Relationships are put right, strengthened and grown
- Integrity and spirituality are nurtured and matured

Eating this *shalom* meal is sharing the bread of gentleness in the community of faith.



We shall be working out and working with the implications of Breaking Bread being a Peacemeal throughout the remaining sessions.

¹² See Mt 6:11; Lk 11:3

¹³ Lk 22:16,18



Questions

1. What do you make of the statement, 'The only physical thing that Jesus leaves, with which to build the church – is a table'?
2. Why do you think so many different names have been given to this meal? Is it saying something significant about breaking bread?
3. Is referring to breaking bread as the 'Peacemeal' helpful and valid?

Reading and Resources

- R Banks *'Paul's Idea of Community'* Hendrickson 1994
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