

Exploring Communion - Reflection

Acts 6:1-6

1 Corinthians 11:17-26, 33-34

Luke 19:1-10

If we think about the stories in the Gospel of Luke, so many of them have involved food. It seems that Jesus was always eating and drinking with someone. No wonder, back in chapter 7, he was accused of being a “glutton and a drunkard”! Over the last year, we have heard stories of meals, parables about meals, and various other tales about food and hospitality. In today’s reading we come to the last such food story before the entry into Jerusalem and it is the story of Zacchaeus climbing a tree to see Jesus (and then having a meal with him).

In ancient times sharing food was an important symbol of the people one found acceptable. Who one ate with, gave an individual, and by extension their family, status – or conversely stripped status away. Because of this association between meals and connections, it was reasonable to think that Zacchaeus assumed Jesus would not have a meal with him. Besides, as a tax collector, Zacchaeus was rather likely to be ritually unclean – he had to go into Gentile houses for his work as well as examining goods, both of which had the potential to render him unclean. Jesus, on the other hand, has no such scruples about who he eats with and what their ritual state is. He simply tells Zacchaeus that he is coming to dine with him.

This connection between the people sharing a meal and sharing status was also an important part of the early church. It was important for two reasons. Firstly, it was one of the mechanisms through which aid was distributed to those in need. As we hear in our Acts story, the members of the primitive church brought what they could to be shared out; they worshipped together and ate together. Food was sent out to those who were unable to be present – often the prisoners and the sick – so everyone was included in the community to make sure they had enough.

It is in stories such as these that we find our early forms of what we now call Holy Communion, the Eucharist, or the Lord’s Supper. There are still denominations, such as the Salvation Army, that celebrate Communion in this way rather than it being a part of a church service. However, as we know, Holy Communion did not stay in this sort of format and it later became ritualised as we have it today. Our Epistle reading forms part of that story.

The first thing to say is that in this letter Paul is not advocating for the ritualised form of Communion that we have today – although over time, that is what it came to mean. There was a problem in the Christian community – quite a few problems actually – and this problem was that those who could arrive early to worship would start eating that shared meal before other people arrived, and those who came later could only have the leftovers. Imagine being invited to a church dinner and then getting leftovers because you were running late.

Now, in our culture we are rather fixated on time and for many of us we would not consider being late without an adequate reason. However, in the ancient culture – before watches – time was much more fluid, so the people coming late were not being rude.

And then there was the reason why they were late. Those who could come early were the wealthy. They could set their slaves to work and go out to socialise, discuss philosophy and theology, and all those other activities in which the wealthy of Greco-Roman society would engage. The people who came later were the poorer people – the ones who had to finish their jobs before they came out, or even the slaves who had to wait until their master was ready to let them off for the night.

So, as you can see, the reason the people are told to eat at home if they are hungry, was because the people who needed the meal the least were the ones who got the most. The ones who relied on the shared meal because of their status in society, were the ones who missed out. The whole point of the primitive church's shared meal was turned upside down and undermined by the greed of those who already had enough.

And what of us? What is it that we are saying by *how* we have Holy Communion? Before Covid, there were different ways the various worshipping communities celebrated Communion. These ways came from our different traditions that came into church union and represented both different theologies of Communion and the practices shaped by historical factors. Sometimes... or often... the practicalities led to the theology rather than the other way around. Indeed, at the start of Covid I would often joke that in a few more years' time we will have a theology of the "holy hand sanitiser."

This is a significant reason for changing how we serve Communion. I think that in our current way of serving, we miss something of the fellowship aspect of Communion – it becomes focused on the individual and God rather than the community. I know there are others who for different reasons like the current way of serving, and that is why we will be alternating between the old and a new way of serving.

So, today as Communion is served, you will be invited to stay in your seats, and we will bring the elements to you. Hold onto them and we will all eat and drink together, as a community. It might take us a few months to iron out any bumps, so please do be patient.

And as Communion is being served, you may like to reflect on what the different approaches say to you about how we are in relationship with each other and with God.