

I can think of nothing better than a good meal with friends around a table. I love the way in which by sharing food and drink together we are able to relax into an evening of great conversation.

So it was every Passover, but this Passover was different. On this day, at this table, Jesus grants the gift of his life to them and to us. But at this table of belonging and wholeness, tragically, betrayal and death also lurk.

We hear from the passage read that Jesus and his friends made preparation; they looked for a place to hold their meal, they went and found the place Jesus had told them to, they prepared the meal. For me half the fun of having people for a meal is preparing menus, getting all the ingredients and then preparing the meal. Alongside this there is the inevitable tidy up and cleaning the house and the setting of the table. It is all part of the ritual. Miss any part out and there is a sense in which you are not respecting the visitors you have coming or the occasion that is happening.

Ritual is important. This was particularly true in the in the Passover meal, the Pesach celebration. The Passover celebrated how God delivered Israel from slavery into freedom, how God delivered Israel from the bondage of Egyptian power to the liberation of God's holy embrace. At a moment of deep threat, God spared the lives of those who adorned their doorways with the blood of a sacrificed lamb. As death reigned in Egypt, the life promised to God's people was fulfilled.

So we get to this very important meal. In verse 20, we hear that Jesus was 'reclining with the twelve'. It is thought that the traditional Roman and indeed middle eastern pose was to recline, usually leaning to the side on your left buttock! It showed you were relaxed and ready. It also meant you could easily reach for your sword if happened to be needed in a hurry. So the Passover ritual began. The ritual of the Passover meal is today still part of the Jewish year, although we would be mistaken if we think it would have been the same ritual as in Jesus' day. We don't really know the format of the meal, although it is likely that many of the elements were similar.

The conversation at the meal flowed, but then during the meal we are told that Jesus told his disciples that one of them is going to betray him. We heard they all looked puzzled at one another and said, 'surely not I, Lord?'. We have the hindsight to know that Jesus was talking about Judas Iscariot. But interestingly he didn't throw Judas out. He just carried on with Judas remaining at the table. If you look at verse 31 Jesus tells them that each one of them will 'fall away on account of me'. You see it is not just Judas that betrayed Jesus, but that each one of them. Truth be known, none of us deserve a place at the table with Jesus. We all will let him down, but the amazing truth is that there is room at Christ's table for everyone, no matter who you are, there is room.

Then we have the most famous phrases which form such a central part of our celebration of Holy Communion- This is my body and this is my blood. It is here where Jesus is making reference to the sacrifices of the Old Testament and the story of Abraham, Isaac and the sacrificial lamb. It is of course a reminder to us all of the sacrifice that Jesus made on our part.

So in this story we have themes of ritual, of sacrifice, of betrayal and of forgiveness. But there is also of hope. One of the unfortunate things that has happened over the centuries is that translators have decided the theme of a passage and inserted their own titles. Often this is helpful, but occasionally it is not! This is one of those. This passage is often known as 'The Last Supper', but if you read it carefully it is anything but the 'last supper'. It is true that it was probably the last meal that Jesus shared with his friends on earth. But the point of this story is that Jesus goes to a whole new place to share a meal with them in a different kingdom. Verse 29 'I tell you I will not drink of the fruit of the vine from now on until the day when I drink it new with you in the Father's kingdom.' So who does he say he is going to share this glass of wine with? 'All of you'. Interestingly, he doesn't say 'all of you, except for Judas and anyone else who lets me down!' He said 'All of you'.

I would like to use a bit of poetic licence here. I picture Jesus thinking, 'yeah you Judas, there is room in my heart to forgive even you'. But there is also room in my heart for the rest of you; for you James & John, yeah I know you haven't quite got it with your arguments about who is going to sit where, but there's room in my heart for you. And you Thomas, bless you Thomas, so much doubt, but you know, there is still room in my heart for you. And you Mary and Martha, you are all going to be sharing a bottle of wine with me in my Father's kingdom'.

You see we can read this passage as gloom, but actually I think we should read it as glorious. Whoever you are there is room at the table for you. This is not a select gentlemen's club as Victorian days. It is not up to us to decide who can and cannot be invited, despite that fact that it is so often the case that people try. The Jesus I believe in is the one who sits at an open table, a table which has room for us all.

*'The story of the Lord's Supper thus subverts the assumptions that have brought the disciples this far on their journey with Jesus — our assumptions, too: that this meal is for insiders, for the righteous, for the chosen few who will judge the twelve tribes, for the true believers, the exceptions to Israel's longstanding betrayal of God's prophets.'*

**Stanley Saunders**

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The God of the 'open table' welcomes each one of us. Whoever you are, you are welcome, whatever you have done, you are welcome. Steve Chalke, the writer and founder of the Oasis church wrote a book a few years ago, called 'Being Human'. In it he talks about how the Oasis Church in Waterloo designed a 'welcome statement' which reads:

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Sadly, so often through church the church has forgotten that all are welcome at this table, often, I am afraid to say, because of our own misconceptions, personal prejudices and personal attitudes. What is even worse is we have taken the words of scripture and twisted them to justify our prejudices. Personally, I shudder when some quote bible verses, usually out of context to justify their views and prejudices. Over the past few years I have heard this

type of justification used to argue against all sorts of things, about immigration, about race, about and more recently about human sexuality. If we believe the bible is important and relevant to today, then the least we can do to is to engage with it correctly and learn how to read passages in context. Do that and the God who welcomes each one of us will give you a much greater understanding of who he is and his plan for each one of us.

So as we walk with Jesus this Lent and Holy week, I would encourage us all to examine our prejudices and the misconceptions that we carry with us on the walk , take time to really understand what the bible is telling us so that when we arrive for glorious meal at the open table Jesus prepares for us we too can recline at the Lord's table, knowing that we have encouraged others on the way.