

Text: Luke 22:7-20
Date: 17th July 2022
Place: Fellowship@10
Theme: Meals as Enacted Salvation - Chapter 5

Introduction

Today we reflect on Chapter 5 of *'A Meal with Jesus'* by Tim Chester.

Chapter 5 is about Meals as enacted salvation.

In Chapter 5 Chester explores the theology of food and meals, the Passover and the Last Supper. According to Chester, *"To understand the Lord's Supper, we need to sketch a biblical theology of food and meals."*

His theology of good and meals are:

- ***We Use Food for Control Instead of Looking to God's Greatness***
- ***We Use Food for Image Instead of Looking to God's Glory***
- ***We Use Food for Refuge Instead of Looking to God's Goodness***
- ***We Use Food for Identity Instead of Looking to God's Grace***

I find some of his ideas interesting but not necessarily inspiring. Chester also connects the Passover with the Last Supper.

What is the Passover?

Passover is the holiday during which Jewish people celebrate their ancestors' freedom from slavery in Egypt. The Feast of Passover, along with the Feast of Unleavened Bread, was the first of the festivals to be commanded by God for Israel to observe (Exodus 12).

One of the ways Passover is celebrated is by eating a celebratory meal with family and friends called a *seder*. Seder literally translates to "order," because there is a ritual order that is followed in the meal. A central theme of the meal is the retelling of the Passover story.

The Passover Story

The Passover story occurs in the Book of Exodus in the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament). A central story, it reflects many prevalent themes in Jewish history, including oppression and the yearning for freedom, the resilience of the Jewish people and the protection given by God, and the importance of a Jewish homeland. Through the annual retelling of the Passover story, Jews reflect on how their ancestors survived adversity. According to Chester, "The Passover became the identity-defining practice of Israel. It was their theological education. Each Passover, children were to ask about its significance, and the story would be retold. Through this meal they understood the nature of their God and their own identity. This is theology served up on the meal table."

And as I mentioned earlier Chester seeks to connect the Passover with the Last Supper. Millions of people believe that Jesus' Last Supper was, in fact, a Passover meal in commemoration of the Jewish festival called Passover. Experts in biblical studies claim the Last Supper to be the Passover, while many do not believe in drawing parallels between the Last Supper and the Passover.

This morning I want to reflect with you on the Last Supper.

The Passover undoubtedly is a very important event in the life of Jesus, who is a Jew.

In Luke Chapter 22 we find Jesus telling his disciples, Peter and John to prepare the Passover meal: *“Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. ⁸ So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, “Go and prepare the Passover meal for us that we may eat it.” ⁹ They asked him, “Where do you want us to make preparations for it?” ¹⁰ “Listen,” he said to them, “when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him into the house he enters ¹¹ and say to the owner of the house, ‘The teacher asks you, “Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’” (vs. 7-11)*

Luke has placed the Lord’s Supper in the context of the Bible story, looking back to the Passover and forward to the messianic banquet. (Chester) According to Chester, *“The bread and wine in the New Testament are part of a meal. Luke says of the Jerusalem church, “Breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46). Commentators often can’t decide whether this refers to meals in general or Communion. That’s because we assume they’re two different things. We think of a meal taking place around the dining table at home while we think of Communion as a solemn rite in a church building. But in Jerusalem followers of Jesus ate meals together in their homes, eating bread, drinking wine, remembering Jesus, and celebrating the community he created through his death.”*

Why bread and wine? Why didn’t Jesus say, “Say this in remembrance of me”? Why give us physical substances to eat and drink? (P.119) He could have. Historically most debates on the Last Supper or the Communion or the Eucharist or the Lord’s Supper focus on the status of the bread and wine. Transubstantiation versus consubstantiation. Apostolic authority in serving the elements versus the congregationalist view of the priesthood of all believers. Honestly, none of which

captures my attention. Over time the Church has turned a simple meal into a sacrament with many rules, rituals, and regulations.

I remember a colleague of mine who was supposed to conduct communion at the college chapel. She was terrified because the lecturer who taught her *'Sacraments in the church'* would be at the chapel service. She was afraid she might not do it right. I believe there is NO right or wrong way to conduct communion.

Let me be honest, over the years each denomination has developed its own understandings of the Last Supper and how it ought to be served or shared. And unfortunately, Christians have squabbled over this across centuries. The communion or Eucharist or the Lord's Supper is supposed to be a meal that makes us one not a meal to divide us.

I love these words of Invitation from the Iona Abbey:

"The table of bread and wine is now to be made ready. It is the table of company of Jesus, and all who love him.

It is the table of sharing with the poor of the world, with whom Jesus identified himself.

It is the table of communion with the earth, in which Christ became incarnate.

So come to this table, you who have much faith and you who would like to have more; you who have been here often and you who have not been for a long time; you who have tried to follow Jesus, and you who have failed; come.

It is Christ who invites us to meet him here. — An Invitation, Iona Abbey [1]

You and I know that Jesus' most consistent social action was eating in new ways and with new people, encountering those who were oppressed or excluded from the

system. A great number of Jesus' healings and exorcisms take place while he's entering or leaving a house for a meal. In the process he redefines power and the kingdom of God. Jesus shows us that spiritual power is primarily exercised *outside* the structure of temple and synagogue.

As Christianity developed, the Church moved from Jesus' meal with open table fellowship to its continuance in the relatively safe ritual meal we call the Eucharist. Unfortunately, that ritual itself came to redefine social reality in a negative way, in terms of worthiness and unworthiness — the opposite of Jesus' intention! Even if we deny that our intention is to define membership, it is clearly the practical message people hear today.

It is strange and inconsistent that sins of marriage and sexuality seem to be the only ones that exclude people from the table when other sins like greed and hatefulness are more of a public scandal.

Notice how Jesus is accused by his contemporaries. By one side, he's criticized for eating with tax collectors and sinners (Matthew 9:10-11, for example); by the other side, he's judged for eating too much (Luke 7:34) or with the Pharisees and lawyers (Luke 7:36-50, 11: 37-54, 14:1).

He ate with both sides. He ate with lepers (Mark 14:3), he received a woman with a bad reputation at a men's dinner (Luke 7:36-37), and he even invited himself over to a "sinner's" house (Luke 19:1-10). He didn't please anybody, it seems, always breaking the rules and making a bigger table.

We know during Jesus' time, religious law was being interpreted almost exclusively through the Book of Leviticus, particularly chapters 17-24, the Law of Holiness. Let's be clear Jesus was a Jew and he critiques his own tradition. He refuses to interpret the Mosaic law in terms of inclusion/exclusion, the symbolic self-identification of Judaism as the righteous, pure, elite group. We know that Jesus continually interprets the Law of Holiness in terms of the God whom he has met — and that God is always *love, compassion, and mercy*.

Do you know on July 18 1573, the painter Paulo Veronese was summoned by the Holy Office of the Inquisition? He was accused of heresy for having painted an insufficiently traditional and overly populated Last Supper. A quick glance at the picture, painted for the refectory of the monastery at San Zanipolo in Venice and now in the Accademia, reveals the problem. The participants in the sacred meal are altogether too many and of the wrong kind— “buffoons, drunkards, Germans, dwarfs, and similar vulgarities.”

Can you believe that? What did he do? *Not wishing to change the painting itself, Veronese transformed it into a sort of “penultimate supper” merely by amending the title, calling it “Feast in the House of Levi,” and adding the inscription “Luke 5:29”: “Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them.” to one of the painting’s pillars to indicate a different Gospel meal scene that more readily tolerated the presence of clowns and soldiers. In doing so he solved his immediate problem, but pointed to another; for the story of Veronese’s trial indicates not only the importance of the Last Supper of Jesus as an image for the Eucharist of the Church, but also the tension evident even in the Gospel tradition between that Last Supper and the nature of those suppers that preceded it.*



The Feast in the House of Levi - Paolo Veronese Cena in Casa Levi

I will end my reflection by making the point that Inquisitors and Reformers alike based their eucharistic theologies firmly on the story of Jesus' final meal, however different the results.

Yet the renaming of Veronese's canvas reminds us that, for scholars and worshippers as much as for artists, the solemn meal in the upper room seems to act as a delicate filter or hinge between earlier meals of Jesus populated by tax collectors and sinners, abundant and joyous, and the later meal of the Church, formal, ritualized, and exclusive.

Were it not for a solemn transition such as the Last Supper as usually depicted, the meals of Jesus might have provided a somewhat different set of models for the meals of the Church.

Remember always, however, communion is conducted it's an OPEN TABLE.
Let's locate the source of the Eucharist or Communion more broadly within the context of other meals in Jesus' life and not merely the Last Supper.

And to take seriously the various layers of meaning that can be discerned within the New Testament and the different ways that the individual New Testament writers describe those meals.