

“You’re Invited to a Meal”

(John 13.1-17)

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Introduction

By Thursday evening we’re deep into the action of Holy Week. Jesus and his movement have publicly thrown down their challenge to Rome (in the triumphal entry) and their religious collaborators (in shutting-down the Temple.) Every day the conflict has intensified through the verbal contest between Jesus and his opponents in the Temple precinct. But now the authorities have what they need; a traitor within the inner circle of disciples... someone who knows the program so Jesus can be arrested away from the protection of the Passover crowds. Tonight is *their* night... a night of darkness to shroud evil deeds. But first... there’s a meal... a meal planned and staged by Jesus... to be a foundation for the ongoing life of the movement beyond his death... a death he now accepts as inevitable and necessary.

But before we go any further, remember what Jesus has said... *‘If any want to be my followers, let them forget their own safety and take up the cross and follow me.’* (Matt. 16.24) *‘Join me... walk with me... we do this together.’* This is the Jesus *movement!* It is the Way – not belief, not attendance, not watching from a safe distance – none of that will get it done. The question of Holy Week is... *‘Will we join Christ and be part of this?’*

Tonight we’re invited to a meal...

Which doesn’t sound too challenging. But it’s nothing like the food-obsessed, privilege-driven self-indulgence of contemporary culture. This is a meal planned and staged with subversive intent. A meal designed to launch and sustain a radical community of protest and change, beyond the execution of its leader.¹

A Radically Different Future

¹ And beyond the small group of insiders that sit down at table with Christ this night.

This meal is both planned and held in secret – it needs to be. Jesus gives the responsibility for its preparation to only two of the disciples – they’re the only ones given the password and the site of the upper room prior to the night – perhaps aware there is now a traitor in their company...² The secrecy tells us that this meal *must* happen – it’s one more action Jesus is determined to complete before handing himself over to his enemies. And it must happen in Jerusalem, not the safe-house in Bethany, because he wants it to connect with the heart of the Passover festival.

For the Passover meal itself, the meal all faithful Jews celebrate this night, is a subversive memory from the past – the night when God liberated the oppressed people of Israel from the cruel yoke of mighty Egypt... the night those held in bondage were set free. At a time of history when the Jewish people were once again experiencing bitter oppression at the hands of a foreign power, that memory of Passover crackled with potency. Their God is one who sets captives free.

The Passover meal is a freedom-meal... and the Jesus Movement has come to Jerusalem to proclaim that it’s time for the world to change... now! The Kingdom of God is here and now!

Jesus intentionally takes this *past* memory ritualised in the Passover and transforms it into a meal with a particular subversive *future*. He dramatically makes it the sacred meal of The Way... of The Kingdom... by taking the two central elements of the feast – bread and wine – and forging direct connection with the self-offering he is now ready to make.

‘Eat this bread – it’s my body broken in torture and crucifixion... for the Kingdom... for you... so that you and all people may be free.’

‘Drink this wine – it’s my blood spilling out of me from the cross... for the Kingdom... for you... so that you and all people may be free.’

‘When you gather together, as my community, my movement, take bread and wine and remember! Remember me... my words, what I’ve done, all that I’ve shown and taught you... and know that I’m with you still. My spirit will never leave you.

Remember God... the One who sets you free.

Remember the Kingdom – all that we’ve dreamed of, worked for...

And remember the Way – walk it... never surrender it!’

² This is how the Gospels tell the story, particularly Mark. As with the donkey for the procession, it shows there’s been prior planning with supporters in the city itself – there’s a large upstairs room furnished and ready, and it’s made available without question on delivery of the right password, “*The teacher asks...*” (Mark 14.12-16)

This is the meal we're invited to. If we join this meal, we commit ourselves to the hope of a radically different future... for all people. And to join this meal is to say 'yes' to the transformation of our own life too... offered in service of the Kingdom. There can be no future that doesn't start *with* us and *in* us... you and me.

A Radically Different Community

We call it the *Last Supper*... for it is the last time Jesus will sit to a meal with the disciples. But it is also the *First Supper*... the first meal of the *new* movement that will carry Jesus' name beyond his death... the new movement that was originally called 'The Way' before assuming the name we know it by, 'The Church'. Tonight Jesus initiates, not a new religious institution, but a radically different community, charged with carrying the hope of freedom into the future of the world.

If we join this meal tonight, we're signing up to the life of a community.³ This is not a road that can be envisaged as private or individual... not something that can be walked alone. It's a community – it matters that we see and commit to everyone around the table... and to the communal life of the movement itself. And the distinguishing features of the Community of the Way... are love and mutual service.

A Radically Different Understanding of Where Life Waits

This new table fellowship⁴ is bound by powerful solidarity forged in the love of Christ Jesus and fuelled by the subversive hope of God's freedom... **But...** this meal takes place in encroaching darkness. There's little conversation at this meal... no laughter... for there's no happy ending tonight. Staying with Jesus on 'the Way' means facing the inevitability and necessity of suffering.

³ As *John* tells the story, this dinner names two essential characteristics for the continuing movement. Jesus takes off his robe, ties a towel around his waist and washes their feet... as a slave would for a master. But this is *mutual* service. *'I have given you this sign... a model and a pattern for you to follow. Serve one another!'* And then as the meal comes to an end, the traitor having left to do his dark business, Jesus speaks a word so critical that he calls it a 'new commandment'... giving it the highest priority possible... *'Love one another!'*

⁴ If the word 'fellowship' has lost 'grunt' for you, think of Tolkien's 'The Fellowship of the Ring' – the diverse companions – hobbits, elf, wizard, dwarf and men – bonded together in service to save the world.

Human fear... weakness... failure... is very real at this table. *"One of you will betray me."* The traitor Judas finds his moment to slink away and tell the authorities the next destination... And by the end of the night, Peter will have publicly disowned Jesus (*"I don't know him!"*) and the rest – the eleven named men anyway – will have run away. (*"All of them deserted him and fled."*) If you need idealised perfection, if you want 'happy ever after'... don't come to this meal... don't join this movement.

If you want an easy road this isn't it. Tonight's meal opens into vulnerability and suffering. Next stop is the Garden, Gethsemane... The garden of agony – Christ's prayer as he waits – *"Abba, Father, take this cup away from me."* The garden of betrayal – *"The one I kiss is the man."* It's the night of violent arrest and torture, secret trial and false accusation... ending in the Temple's verdict... *'This man is guilty and he must die.'*

This meal prepares its diners for the Way that leads through suffering and death. To join this table is to embrace a radically different understanding of where true life waits.

Conclusion

The question of Holy Week isn't *'Do you believe?'* but *'Will you be part of this? Will you join this Movement, this Way? Will you follow?'*

Tonight we're invited to a meal...

- A meal committed to hope in a very different future... to Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God.
- A meal that binds us to the life of a radically different community, marked by service and love.
- A meal that opens to darkness, suffering and human weakness... and requires a radically different trust in where God waits.

Will we give ourselves to such a meal as this?