

## RESURRECTION MEALS AND THE HEAVENLY BANQUET

Isaiah 25:6-9 – The heavenly banquet

Revelation 19:5-9 – The wedding supper of the lamb

Luke 24:13-35 – The Emmaus road meal

1. This is the last in our sermon series on Holy Communion. We've looked at its original context in the Last Supper, which began as a Passover meal, with Jesus then changing the script, and thereby the symbolic significance of the meal. In this context, Holy Communion, like the Passover, is a celebration of God's mighty act of deliverance and salvation, now not in terms of the rescue of the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt, but rather rescue for humanity from the power of sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus. We also began to think about symbol and sacrament. In the second sermon we thought about Jesus' ministry through meals, and the acceptance that comes through table fellowship, with the message that all are welcome. In the third sermon we thought about the links between the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 and the feeding of the Israelites with the manna in the wilderness and Holy Communion, with the two key concepts emerging of sustenance and sharing.
2. This week we're going to look at two further aspects of Holy Communion: the links between Holy Communion and the resurrection meals of Jesus, and also the images of heaven as a sumptuous banquet. These two topics – the resurrection meals and the depiction of heaven as a banquet – could each do with a separate sermon, but this current sermon series is designed to fit within the time constraints of the season of Lent.
3. Let's begin by looking at the links between Holy Communion and the resurrection meals. Have you ever noticed how many of the resurrection appearances of Jesus are set in the context of meals?
  - i) In St. Mark's Gospel we have Jesus appearing to the disciples, "as they were eating". (Mark 16:14).
  - ii) In John's Gospel we have the account of the breakfast that Jesus prepared on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The disciples had had a frustrating night catching no fish, but then early in the morning Jesus appears and tells them where to throw their net, with the result they take in a miraculous catch of fish. Upon hauling the net ashore, they have breakfast with Jesus and their faith in him is renewed. (John 21:1-14)
  - iii) In Luke's Gospel we find the risen Jesus, in response to the fear, amazement and joy of the disciples, asking them for something to eat. (Luke 24:36-43)
4. But in particular I want to dwell on the Emmaus road story (Luke 24:13-35). On the day of the resurrection, two of Jesus' disciples were walking from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus seven miles away. They were completely downcast because they had witnessed Jesus' death on Good Friday, and all their hopes had been dashed. Then a stranger comes up and walks alongside them. He talks about the dramatic events of Holy Week, and relates them to the prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures. When they finally get to their destination, the disciples invite the stranger to have a meal with them. It is as he takes the bread and

breaks it that the disciples suddenly recognise who their companion throughout their journey has been – none other than Jesus.

Notice what Jesus did at the very moment the disciples recognised him. St. Luke writes, “When he was at table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him...” (Luke 24:30,31) Here we have the classic fourfold action that we have already come across in the Passover meal, and also in the feeding of the 5,000 with Jesus:

- \* taking bread
- \* giving thanks
- \* breaking the bread
- \* giving it.

This fourfold action is repeated every time a priest celebrates Holy Communion. In St. Luke’s mind, there is a clear connection between the resurrection meals of Jesus (especially the meal at Emmaus) and the celebration of Holy Communion.

5. This carries great significance for our understanding of Holy Communion. It is not just a memorial of something that happened in the past. Rather, it is directly connected with an acknowledgement of the presence of the risen Christ here and now as we, too, take bread, give thanks, break it and share it. This is why Holy Communion is celebrated with a mixture of reverence and joy. Like the disciples at the Emmaus Road meal, we ask that our eyes may be opened to discern the Lord. It is a fulfilment of the liturgical affirmation at the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer: “The Lord is here. His Spirit is with us.”
6. As we think about the resurrection meals, our thoughts also flow on from resurrection to the hope of heaven. In turning our attention to the heavenly home that awaits us, let me ask a similar introductory question: have you noticed how often heaven is pictured in terms of a banquet? This is an image which can be found throughout the Bible, from the Old Testament all the way through to the final pages of the New Testament.
  - i) In the Old Testament, a classic passage is the one from Isaiah 25:6-9, that we have heard this morning. The prophet is looking forward to the Day of the Lord when God’s purposes will be fulfilled. In images later picked up in the Book of Revelation to describe the culmination of history, Isaiah looks forward to the day when death will be swallowed up for ever and when “the Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces.” This picture of the final establishment of God’s will, the coming of God’s Kingdom that we long for, is couched in terms of a banquet, “On this mountain, the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine – the best of meats and the finest of wines.” (Isaiah 25:6)
  - ii) This depiction of heaven in terms of a banquet is picked up by Jesus in his teaching. A well-known example is the parable of the Great Banquet, in which a man prepares a great feast and invites many guests. When some of these guests make excuses, then the invitation is extended to all and sundry. (Luke 14:15-24) The parable

conveys the message that not just the original guests (the Israelites) are invited, but now all people (the Gentiles) are invited to share in this banquet.

Later in the Gospel, Jesus looks forward to the heavenly banquet as he confronts his own death when he says to the disciples at the Last Supper, "I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the Kingdom of God comes." (Luke 22:18)

iii) The image of the heavenly banquet is also found at the end of the Bible, as we heard in our reading from the Book of Revelation. Here it is pictured in terms of a wedding feast. (Revelation 19:9) How good it is to be invited to this special meal.

7. This Biblical teaching using the image of a banquet to talk about heaven is picked up by the wording of the Communion service. In the prayer we use just before coming up to receive communion we say together, "So cleanse and feed us with the precious body and blood of your Son, that he may live in us and we in him; *and that we, with the whole company of Christ, may sit and eat in your kingdom.*" (p. 9)

So Holy Communion is an anticipation of the heavenly banquet that awaits us all.

8. As we come to the end of this sermon series on Holy Communion we can see that it is indeed a meal of many meanings. It is a meal that is multi-dimensional, bringing together past, present and future perspectives.

i) In Holy Communion we look back to its origins in the Passover meal which became the Last Supper; we think of Jesus' sacrifice and death on the cross as the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and we celebrate the great act of deliverance and salvation that he has achieved for us.

i) In the present, drawing on the example of the feeding of the 5,000 we think of how Holy Communion sustains us on our journey of faith through the wilderness of this world and we are challenged to share God's gracious provision with those around us. Also, recalling the resurrection meals, each time we celebrate Holy Communion, we acknowledge the presence of the risen Lord amongst us.

iii) In the future, we look forward to the heavenly banquet that awaits us in the fullness of God's presence, and in the company of all the saints.

9. So let us give thanks for the sacrament of Holy Communion, entrusted to us by Jesus himself, and the salvation he has achieved for us. Let us continue to be nourished by Holy Communion as part of our faithful discipleship until we, too, in the company of Jesus, reach journey's end and take our place at the heavenly banquet.