

The Christian Camelot

By Dr. Dave Neale

Last week we talked about how the gift of the Holy Spirit had been given to the *Community of the Forgiven* by God. There was this simple conditional idea: **if** you humbly change your mind before God, your sins are forgiven through the work of Jesus, **then** you receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In the Acts as the εκκλησια, *ekklēsia*, an “assembly, a gathering, a meeting” who have been forgiven by God (doesn’t occur in the gospels¹). This eventually came to be known as the “church.”

We talked about the word *gift* of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, *dōrean*, could be rendered as “the indescribable bounty of God.”

But the most striking thing about the day of Peter’s first sermon was how it drew converts to Jesus from an extravagantly diverse population of 15 different language groups; every kind of race, class, gender, a true democracy of grace.

This morning we look at the communal life of the first followers in the months after Jesus’ resurrection. In this brief summary of 2:42-47, Luke describes that communal life.

I’ve always thought of this as a somewhat stylized summary. Luke was certainly prone to borrowing from the literary conventions of his day. It describes something of a Christian Camelot – that is, a time and place of idyllic happiness.

Is it reliable history? Do memories constitute good history? Well, it has that rosy patina of ‘the good old days’ that we sometimes long for when life has gotten so complicated and painful.

John Mayer said, ‘Mom, don’t you think you should have checked with me before you threw out my Spiderman lunchbox.’

For just a while, it was heaven on earth for the new followers – ***having the good will of all the people.***

It was not to last long, I’m afraid. The story of the over-arching narrative of Acts is how the movement which started so beautifully, was then hounded out of Jerusalem by those opposed to the messianic message, and how such figures as Philip, Peter and Paul, oversaw the spread of the gospel of Jesus across the Mediterranean basin, all the way to Rome.

But for this morning we bask in the glow of Camelot and see if there is something that we modern members of the Community of the Forgiven can learn about life and witness for Jesus.

Here are the components of that Christian Camelot: [A separate slide for each bullet... Or have them come up one at a time on one slide as I mention them?]

- Awe
 - ***Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.*** (43)
- Generosity

- ***All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.*** (44-45)
- The went to church (temple) daily
 - ***Day by day, as the spent much time together in the temple...*** (46a)
- Numerical growth
 - ***And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*** (47)

What I want to focus today is actually the most radical feature of the practices of the first followers. It is the seemingly mundane practice of eating together. Everyone ate together irrespective of background, race, rich or poor, or spiritual standing.

Commensality word of the day! And it means a “social group that eats together”.

The root of the word is the same as for our word “common” and derives from a Greek word used to describe Christian fellowship, *koinonia* (κοινωνία).

In the six economical verses that describe the Christian Camelot, two mention eating together.

- Table Fellowship (Twice!)
 - ***They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*** (Acts 2:42)
 - ***...they broke bread from house to house*** (as some translate the *te kat’ oikon*) ***and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of the people.***(46b)

This may seem unremarkable to us here in our culture. We don’t have strong traditions around communal meals. The family meal is very important part of a family dynamic. Most of us understand what we are losing when it becomes an impracticality in the hectic lifestyle that is today’ norm. But it’s an endangered tradition worth fighting for.

In the time of Jesus there was a widespread belief in the Ancient Near East that communion at table represents an intimate fellowship. Social pecking order. So you did not sit at table with those who were above or below you, unless invited. There are many references to this in the New Testament.

...If you take notice of the one wearing fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” have you not become evil judges? (James 2:3-4)

Jesus taught on seating at meals in Luke 14 that we should always assume the lowest place at the table - better to be asked to come forward than asked to vacate a place for someone more distinguished. Then he says, don’t invite your friends, invite the ***poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed... at the resurrection of the righteous.***

The Rabbis believed, “But if three have eaten at one table and have spoken over it words of the Law, it as if they had eaten from the table of God” (Mishnah, *Aboth* 3:3). There is robust theology of commensality in the Jewish world and beyond.

The most compelling evidence of the revolutionary nature of Christian dining comes from Jesus himself. For we notice that every time the Pharisees criticize Jesus for the lowly company he keeps, it is always mentioned that it is because he “eats with sinners.”

When Jesus attends a dinner at Levi the tax collector’s, the Pharisees say, ***Why do you eat with tax collectors and sinners? Jesus answered, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance*** (Luke 5:30-31).

Pharisee were a table fellowship sect within Judaism that defined piety as eat ordinary daily food in the same state of ritual purity as that of the priests. This was their effort the show the utmost piety possible.

So, as with priests, so with Pharisees, certain rules had to be followed. As you look at your plate you have to know that everything has been properly tithed on; you have to know that it has been prepared by the most rigorous purity protocols (halal). You have to know that the meat has been properly slaughtered.²

Most importantly, you have to know that your dining companions don’t bring any ritual impurity to the table, like having touch something unclean.

In Camelot everybody at together. They continued the practice of eating with sinners. Very powerful social and religious statement.

When the new Christian movement adopts Jesus’ dining conventions, they take a controversial stand that everyone who is in the new Community of the Forgiven is an equal participant in grace.

It doesn’t matter where you are from in the Mediterranean Basin, what language you speak, your colour, whether or not you observe Jewish ritual purity laws. Everyone sits at the table of God as an equal.

This is where the common table is transformed from a place of exclusion to a place of radical inclusion.

The Risen Jesus told his disciples, “***...I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel***” (Luke 22:28-30).

What this means for the modern church.

- More potlucks please
- If the church ever experiences a renewal, a refreshing of the Spirit, as it has every half century or so in recent times, it will come with a radically open table, just like the first time.
- The table is the truest expression of the indescribable bounty of God, the extravagant diversity of those who were first called to follow Jesus.

Our Psalm for the week is the famous 23rd Psalm. Do you remember what it says about table fellowship?

You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies. I used to read that as good Old Testament gloating over having vanquished my enemies. But I think it is actually a vision of the table of the Messiah where saint and sinner, ally and enemy alike feast at the Table of God.

Amen

¹ Except twice in Matthew, which are undoubtedly a later emendation. Matt 16:18, 18:17.

² The one thing the Jewish Christians insisted on in Acts 15, after having negotiated away circumcision for Gentiles for Paul's ministry, was that meat be properly slaughtered, the blood drained in good kosher fashion.