

Saint Paul's, Napier: HC Meditation, March 12 2023.

The Meal of Memory and of Hope.

In his life and teaching Jesus demonstrated what could be. In his living he stood on the edge of human possibility and beckoned those who heard him to join with him in entering a new society, discovering new and empowering ways of being together and becoming builders of good human community. He invited his friends to take the next step into lived truth and into a world waiting to be born.

Implicit in all he did and said is the persistent question: What if your life and the life of your society were to be shaped by my teaching? What if we were to serve the purposes of God as known through the teaching of prophets and other wise people?

For instance: What if we were to live within a life of unlimited forgiveness (70X7 times?) rather than within cramped lives shaped by grudges, remembered hurts and a search for revenge?

Or, again: What if our living were shaped by generous hospitality and sharing rather than the greed based forms of living that are encouraged in our day? What if churches, like the table of Jesus, had their doors flung wide open with a welcome to everyone, of every background, sexual orientation and social circumstance, whoever wants to explore what life is all about and what we and our society can become?

Or, What if the search for justice rather than control by the wealthy and the powerful were to be our guide? What if we were to heed and live within the words of the prophet Amos: "Let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever flowing stream."

Or, taking our lead from the parables and other sayings of Jesus, What if sharing took precedence over accumulating? What if the well off were to learn how to share what they have with those who are excluded from the nation's wealth?

Or, What if peace making took precedence over violent reactions to those who threaten or hurt us? What if the words of Isaiah were acted out in our day: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

Or, What if we dwelt within the ever-flowing love of God and appreciated that every person we meet or read about is surrounded by that same love and is to be treated as our brother or sister.

Jesus was and continues to be humanity's great possibility.

When we pray the prayer 'Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven' we declare our commitment to the possibilities lived and taught by Jesus. We

reach out toward a future where his Way, his embodied compassion, is woven into our society. To pray, 'Your kingdom come' is a declaration that we will not be controlled by the death dealing attitudes and values represented by the selfish, greedy, racist and bigoted attitudes that are alive and well in our society just as they were in the time of Jesus and have been throughout western history. We march within a different tune. We reach out toward a different future. It is a future shaped by the Way pioneered by Jesus.

The church at its heart is a community of memory and of hope.

We remember Jesus and the Way he pioneered, we ponder his teaching, his words remembered in the gospels, repeated through the centuries, and interpreted afresh in every generation and in every culture. We pay special attention to how these words have encouraged and empowered the poor and excluded over the years. We remain suspicious of interpretations of his words that serve only the interests of the already powerful and wealthy. We value the patient work of scholars who help us understand the importance of Jesus and how he was interpreted in his day and the encouragement of those who invite us to interpret how Jesus and the Way he pioneered might influence our times.

Not everyone could read in the first century and because Christianity initially grew among the poor and the dispossessed there needed to be other ways of remembering Jesus than reading from an expensive papyrus scroll. So, from the earliest days of the Jesus movement the custom grew that on the first day of the week, the day associated with the story of the resurrection, followers of the Way pioneered by Jesus would gather for a simple meal. At that meal they recalled how Jesus welcomed all manner of people to share his company around a table where no one was excluded. Everyone was welcome at the table of Jesus and at the tables of the first Christians, though the super pious and the wealthy complained he was a friend of sinners. (It was only when the church became strong and powerful and as overbearing as a medieval king that the idea of a 'fenced' table was instituted – initially fenced to keep animals out of the sanctuary in cathedrals and chapels during harsh winter storms – but later 'fenced' to keep out sinners, rebels, strangers, by those who put doctrine and social conformity ahead of human need!)

The shared meal was the way uneducated, poor and marginalised people gathered and together remember Jesus and the Way he pioneered. They imagined themselves to be welcomed to their table by Jesus just as he welcomed people like them in first century Palestine. The very act of being together in an accepting, forgiving, generous and hospitable group and discussing together how they might be peacemakers and justice seekers in their society was their acted out remembrance of Jesus and the Way he pioneered. From the beginning the early followers of the Jesus Way shared simple food at their table gathering. They shared bread and wine, food of the poor in first century Palestine. This was not an occasion for fine food, the food eaten by the wealthy and the powerful in palaces and corporate lounges. It's a meal with light

rations but deep meaning. It continues to be an occasion when we remember Jesus and his ministry among the poor and the dispossessed.

In remembering Jesus in the sharing of a simple meal and sharing their prayers the early Jesus followers also shared their hopes of what could be if life were shaped by the Way pioneered by Jesus. They asked: "What if peace and justice, sharing and forgiveness, acceptance of people regardless of their race, culture or religion were to become common in our communities and our world?" They became people of the 'Christ dream' –imagining a future that would be like an imaginary meal table where acceptance, compassion, conversation and hospitality were primary values. They might have recalled the words of Isaiah: " The Lord of Hosts will make for all the peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well aged wines strained clear...God will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, God will wipe away the tears from all faces." (Is 24:6-10) They may have recited the words of Isaiah 65: 21f: In the new earth that God is bringing to birth, " They shall build houses and inhabit them, they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat;...they shall not labour in vain, or bear children for calamity...the wolf and the lamb shall fed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox...they shall not hurt or destroy...says the Lord." They would have welcomed the words of an early theologian claiming to speak in the spirit of Paul: "God has made known to us the mystery of his purpose made known in Christ: to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth." (Eph. 1:10) From the beginning the Jesus followers were a community of hope. They prayed "your kingdom come on earth" and they sought to live as though God's realm was already present. They became parables of what could be, just as Jesus did in his day. They remembered Jesus and his Way, and in the spirit of Jesus they imagined a future where the qualities and values explored by Jesus would give direction to human living.

Over the centuries the simple meal has taken many forms, not all of them helpful. As the church moves into a perilous future we might rediscover the shape of a shared meal, a meal of memory and of hope, a meal where the food of the poor reminds us we live in an unjust world, where we dream of what might be and explore how we in our day might be sharers in the Way of life pioneered by Jesus, how we might weave threads of his way into our wounded world.

We in Hawkes Bay at this time need no reminders of the woundedness of our world. Cyclone Gabrielle has reminded us of our perilous relationship with the natural world and particularly in an era when human induced climate change and environmental degradation has changed the way we live, or hang on to life. The gap between rich and poor, our misuse of forests and rivers, has again been exposed.

I invite you to join me in extending an imagined invitation to others who we would like to share the Jesus meal with us today, people who we may not know but who we hold in our love in this tough time. We can imagine them being with us.

*Those whose lives have been damaged by Gabrielle's cyclone – homes destroyed, farms decimated, mud everywhere....as they seek to rebuild their future. Welcome them to be with us, imagine them to be present, hold them in our love.

*Politicians and decision makers, planners and workers who will chart pathways into the future for our region and our people...Welcome them to be with us, imagine them to be present, hold them in our love.

*Men and women, people of all ages and of every background who have acted with bravery and skill over recent weeks –rescuing neighbours, comforting the frightened, cooking meals, doing the hard work of clean up and repair...Welcome them to be with us, imagine them to be present. Hold them in our love.

*And because this week we will recall the anniversary of the March 15th 2019 Mosque massacres in Christchurch, let us welcome to our meal the Muslim community throughout NZ as they mourn the murders of 51 good people on that day. (I will be particularly aware of my first cousin, Linda Armstrong, who was murdered on that day in the Linwood mosque by a Muslim hating white supremacist and I invite you to join me in inviting Linda, to be with us in the Jesus meal.) Welcome them to be with us, imagine they are present, hold them in our love.

Imagine they and others who we might name in our hearts are with us as we share this ancient Jesus meal.

Thank you for the invitation to preside at this meal of memory and hope. I recently attended a memorial mass in a Catholic Church. We recalled the death of two sisters who had died within weeks of each other. The priest said something to the effect that; 'I do not have the words to describe how I and we all feel or the depth of affection we have for those who grieve so we will do what we always do on occasions when we have no words: we will pour the wine and share the bread.'

(It reminds me of the ancient description of the central task of Ministers of the Gospel: "To gather the folks, to tell the stories, to break the bread and to share the wine.")