

Sayde the lorde to tho ledes: 'Laytes yet ferre,
Ferre out in the felde, and feches mo gestes;
Waytes gorstes and greves, if ani gomes lygges;
What kyn folk so fare, feches hem hider.

Be thay fers, be they feble, forlotes none,
Be thay ho, be thay halt, be thay on-yyed,
And thagh thay ben bothe blynde and balterande crupples,
That my hous may holly by halkes by fylled.

(Said the lord to those servants: 'Search still further afield, far out in the countryside, and bring more guests; search scrublands and thickets, to see if any men lie hidden; whatever people are there, bring them to this place. Be they bold, be they timid, overlook none, be they sound, be they lame, be they one-eyed, and though they be both blind and stumbling cripples, that my house may be filled right up to the corners.)¹

When the nameless medieval creator of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" and "Pearl" introduces his poem on Noah, Sodom and the downfall of Babylon, "Cleanness", he uses the parable of the Great Feast to contrast its open table with the inhospitable God of those cataclysms. The poem can be read as a protest against the hypocrisy of the medieval church and their "Pharisees", the fraternal orders.² The poet imagines the feast in his own time of poverty, disease and filth and the people who would be included at the banquet.³

Before the "Pharisees" took over God again, Luke sees a revolution that the Gawain poet can only glimpse fitfully. Jesus is seen to be active in Luke's Gospel in relation to his community's radical plan to provide food to the hungry and create a place in society for the isolated. Once these conditions are created,

¹ A.C. Cawley and J.J. Anderson (eds) *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Cleanness, Patience* (London: Dent, 1991), 55.

² "Pharisees" was a common appellation applied to the friars by their opponents.

³ While superficially a moral sermon, things aren't what they seem in this poem. The poet claims to be quoting from Matthew and be on the side of rank and privilege but then proceeds to use the structure and outlook of Luke's version. He claims to be espousing the virtues of purity but mischievously undermines the surface moral by pointing out the impossibility of anyone, let alone the poor peasants he describes, satisfying the wiles of the Old Testament God of vengeance on display with the deluge and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The only place in the story that the acceptance of the unclean masses displayed in the parable is seen again is in a brief interlude describing the nativity where the baby Jesus redeems the same filthy cast of misfits as at the feast, the leprous, the lame and the blind, with his accepting touch.

meals become both a place where Jesus can teach and a sacrament that reveals the risen Christ. Rejecting the purity by separation model, Jesus opens his banquet to the unclean and to sinners and then extends the invitation list so that Jews can entertain table fellowship with Gentiles. The process in which these material concerns are transfigured beyond their immediate physical elements into the metaphor of the Eucharist is already well advanced in Luke's community. Luke is happy to work within the provision of food and hospitality to provide a literary setting for symposium style discourses, but cleverly disregards the conventions of this genre as much as he ignores the niceties of table fellowship. It is clear that Luke's ethics are those of the destitute, where provision for the future is not so much impossible as irrelevant, daily bread is an ask in itself and reliance on God for the morrow is the only alternative to despair. It is arguable that the Christian sacraments that grow out of these concerns are at their most powerful when embodied by those who know what is to be outcast and who know what it is to starve.

For all the spiritual connotations that are present in Luke's Gospel concerning food, there remains a real passion to address physical hunger. Luke is chronicling poor communities: Jesus's followers, the early community of Acts and his own. He carefully notes the Holy Family's oneness with the hungry (1:53, 2:25). He lauds the early community in Acts for its concern for sharing of resources (2:45, 4:32,37) and gives elaborate detail of the mechanism⁴ by which this aspect of the Kingdom was achieved. The letter of James, who in many ways typifies the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem, says:

⁴ Richard I Pervo, "Panto Koina" in Lukas Borkman et al (eds) *Religious Propaganda in the New Testament World* (Leiden: E J Brill, 1994), 170.

If one of the brothers or one of the sisters is in need of clothes and has not enough food to live on, and one of you says to them, “I wish you well; keep yourself warm and eat plenty,” without giving them the bare necessities of life, then what good is that? 2:15-6

This is the situation addressed by the community described by Luke where “they shared their food gladly and generously”. (Acts 2:47)

The use of food as a symbol of life as part of the Eucharist is so pervasive in the Christian tradition it is well to see the physical need for food being met that allowed this understanding to grow. Luke is clearly not only metaphorical about food and the text reveals that relief of physical hunger is part of Jesus’s agenda.

From the material special to Luke we find:

The hungry he has filled with good things. (1:53)

If anyone has two tunics he must share with the man who has none, and the one with something to eat must do the same. (3:11)

Stay in the same house, taking what food and drink they have to offer... eat what is set before you. (10:7,9)

Lend me three loaves, because a friend of mine on his travels has just arrived at my house and I have nothing to offer him. (11:6)

Lazarus...longed to fill himself with the scraps that fell from the rich man’s table. (16:21)

Luke also chooses to transmit Q traditions revealing concern with hunger:

During that time he ate nothing and at the end he was hungry. (4:2)

His disciples were picking ears of corn...and eating them. (6:1)

Happy are you who are hungry now: you shall be satisfied. (6:21)

Give us each day our daily bread (11:3)

What father among you would hand his son a stone when he asked for bread? (11:11)

I am telling you not to worry about ... what you are to eat. (12:22)

Markan traditions to do with lack of food are also included:

Take nothing for the journey: neither staff, nor haversack, nor bread, nor money. (9:3)

Give them something to eat yourselves. (9:13)

Throughout Luke's Gospel it is accepted that the mission starts with meeting the physical needs of the whole community.

Table fellowship in the Jewish world indicated both friendship and mutual obligation.⁵ It was therefore an expression of such intimacy that great concern was taken about guests. In the Jewish worldview there is the further complication that the poor, for obvious economic reasons, ignored the tithing regulations⁶ and the participants in a meal without tithing were regarded as untrustworthy and their food impure. Beyond this purity matter, the issue of the possibility of eating with Gentiles greatly exercised the early Christian community. (eg Acts 11:1-18, Gal 2:11-14)

The parable of the great feast (14:15-24) takes the motif of a banquet to preach a hospitality that goes beyond race, rank and purity. It is placed at a meal to which Jesus has been invited and is under great scrutiny. The parable follows teaching about honour and giving that is resolutely nonmetaphorical. In the preamble to the parable, Jesus simply tells those with means to feed those without, and especially those who can offer you nothing in return and are cursed by their infirmities. This is purely practical and it completes the symbiotic whole with the enjoinder to the poor to cease their worries. (Luke 12:22)

Utopian stories, including the messianic banquet [have] resonances of the problems experienced in various public distributions. Behind the

⁵ Paul J Achtemeier (ed) *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 616.

⁶ David Neale, *None But the Sinners* (Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1991), 49.

miraculous feedings lies the perpetual and desperate effort to obtain food and possess a stomach that does not rumble.⁷

When the banquet story is finally told, Luke tells it as a means to describe what the reign of God will really entail. It is a call to acceptance and welcome and a wake up call to those who think they're invited merely by their ancestry or social standing. Those who come after the elite decline are the very poorest of the urban population surviving on scraps⁸, like poor Lazarus (16:21) and the landless peasantry, doubtless in debt bondage to the busy owners of land and oxen.

The harshness of “not one of those who were invited shall have a taste of my banquet,” (14:24) is transformed by Matthew into quite different and dissonant themes in his parallel wedding feast parable, to include the death of the King's son and the destruction of the city (22:6-7) and the guest without a wedding garment (22:12). The version in the Gospel of Thomas (64) even hints at other invalid wedding feasts and decries the mercenary behaviour presumably in contrast to the other worldly souls who do make the cut. With their spins and additions Matthew and Thomas do little service to the tradition, whereas the simply put teaching, as transmitted in the Lukan text, works well to portray the Kingdom of God as a society where the rejected are fed and given community.

An even more stark contrast is with the messianic banquet as portrayed by the Qumran group. Their banquet involves only their idealised Israel and strict ranking of participants.⁹ They took the purity by separation experiment to its rational conclusion and closed themselves off, creating the Temple and the

⁷ Pervo, “Panta Koina”, 191.

⁸ Willi Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric in Luke 14* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 86.

⁹ Dennis E Smith, “The Messianic Banquet Reconsidered” in Birger A Pearson ed *The Future of Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 71.

Priesthood anew in the desert.¹⁰ This forms the opposite pole to the revolutionary Christian mission to all the people living in the actual Israel and beyond to the Gentiles, where rank is turned on its head and service to all is the key.

It is that “anyone” that negates the very social function of table, namely, to establish a social ranking by what one eats, how one eats, and with whom one eats. It is the random and open commensality of the parable’s meal that is its most startling element.¹¹

Luke’s story of the road to Emmaus is where food and hospitality grow into the experience of resurrection. The story depicts a real meal and involves real generosity, but from that experience the resurrected Jesus becomes known in the breaking of the bread. More pointedly therefore, the journeyers are archetypes of all followers of Christ after his death. In their darkest hour, without hope and guidance, they simply do as they have been shown in their zeal to offer of food and companionship to the stranger. “They pressed him to stay” (24:29) is nothing if not insistent¹², and in their act the presence of the resurrected Christ is revealed. The obvious example by Jesus for the travellers in Luke is the miracle of the loaves (9:12-17), which has strong linguistic echoes of the Emmaus story except that it has Jesus welcoming and feeding the strangers.¹³ As Anderson notes of the Emmaus account,¹⁴ “the story turns on their gracious offer of hospitality to Jesus,” and can be seen to be memorialised in the prayers of the faithful and the procession of the gifts in Roman tradition.¹⁵

¹⁰ Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English 3rd ed* (London: Penguin, 1987), 1-2.

¹¹ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 262.

¹² Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God* (Strathfield, NSW: St Pauls Publications, 2000), 189.

¹³ Wilson K. Poon, “Superabundant Table Fellowship and the Kingdom,” *The Expository Times* 114 (2003), 230.

¹⁴ Frank Andersen, *Eucharist: Participating in the Mystery* (Mulgrave, Victoria: John Garrat Publishing, 1998), 99.

¹⁵ Andersen, *Eucharist*, 99.

Emmaus ties scripture and preaching to the ritualised meal (24:32), but Luke also uses other meal pericopes as opportunities for preaching. He uses the paradigm of the Greek symposium where philosophers taught in a meal setting as one familiar to his readers.¹⁶ Smith uses Luke 14 as an example of Jesus addressing the whole party, then the host and then a guest with a question, and the dialogue that ensues matches the symposium style of the classical tradition.¹⁷ The genre is, however, overturned by Luke and the offence against the symposium tradition adds to his disregard of the rules of the table.

Luke's use of this technique is instructive in his use of the story of the woman called a sinner who anoints Jesus (7:36-50). A version exists in all the Gospels of this broad story but only Luke makes it fly as a homily. Mark uses it as an opportunity for Jesus to reprove the disciples for their failure to see beyond material needs. Matthew adds nothing but actually destroys the table setting given to it by Mark. Luke, conscious of the need for donations, removes the reproof but retains the meal setting and moves it from the end of Jesus's ministry to near the beginning, siting it at his first meal with the Pharisees. In this location, Luke changes the whole point of the tradition. Jesus is invited to dine and is under obligation to his host. The Pharisee has invited Jesus and so is obliged to offer hospitality. The woman is not invited but comes anyway and is really under no obligation to anyone as she is outcast. In this setting, the hospitality of the sinner, whom Jesus should not even be touching, is contrasted with lack of hospitality from the host to devastating effect. It rivals the story of the Good Samaritan for the degree of knife twisting into the soul of Jesus's audience. Jesus's humiliation of his host is of course hardly playing the game by

¹⁶ Dennis E. Smith. "Table Fellowship as a Literary Motif in the Gospel of Luke," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 (1987), 614.

¹⁷ Smith "Table Fellowship", 621.

the rules and that too is precisely the point. Table fellowship as a model for generosity in the Kingdom is not bound by rules of status nor perceptions of piety.

In 10:37-54, he goes beyond humiliation to direct condemnation. As the chief guest at a symposium he might be expected to win the argument with wit and wisdom¹⁸, but he is not meant to simply round on his hosts with a vicious attack. Jesus, while he is invited, just goes in and sits down where he wants leaving the Pharisees still washing their hands. Having upset their scruples about purity concerns and status by this action, Jesus compounds his “error” by pronouncing woes that precisely target their surface observance of tithing and purity that overlooks true justice and compassion. He then attacks their love of status and compliments. He destroys the meal as certainly as if he had tipped over the tables and unsurprisingly provokes fury amongst his fellow guests.

The Gawain poet ends “Cleanness” with the Belshazzar’s feast where the sacred vessels of Solomon’s temple are profaned in a mockery of the great messianic feast of the introduction. Daniel is forcibly brought to the feast, just as the rough peasants in the parable, but as the empowered representative of the Kingdom of Heaven is able to pronounce woes upon the false priests and Belshazzar himself. This inversion of the sacred meal lets the Gawain poet comment on the state of his medieval world. Luke’s Jesus likewise contrasts the closed, life diminishing table fellowship of rank, privilege and meaningless tithes, with the dangerous possibility that open commensality would provide more reliable sustenance for the poor and community for the exile. This is where love

¹⁸ E. Springs Steele, “Luke 11:37-54 – A Modified Hellenistic Symposium?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 (1984),383.

overcomes the need for the protection of status and honour in a tribal world, and where those with status and power give it up to be as one with the outcast. This is indeed a wildly risk taking exercise as admitted by Luke's Jesus in the parable of the mustard seed (13:18-19), a plant notorious for running amok with an ordered garden. But within the messy consequences of this freedom, Luke sees that the hungry and the poor, now fed and embraced, are able to be taught as a community that understands the meaning of hospitality and within that community create a sacred way of living ordinary lives.

Bibliography

- Achtemeier, P. *Harper's Bible Dictionary*. San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1985.
- Anderson, F. *Eucharist: Participating in the Mystery*. Mulgrave, Victoria: John Garratt Publishing, 1998.
- Bormann, L., K. Tredici and A. Standhartinger (eds) *Religious Propaganda and Missionary Competition in the New Testament World: Essays Honoring Dieter Georgi*. Leiden: Brill, 1994.
- Braun, W. *Feasting and Social Rhetoric in Luke 14*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Byrne, B. *The Hospitality of God*. Strathfield, NSW: St Pauls Publications, 2000.
- Cawley, A. and J. Anderson. (eds) *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Cleanness, Patience*. London: Dent, 1991.
- Crossan, J. *The Birth of Christianity*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998.
- Crossan, J. *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991.
- Esler, P. *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Fallon, M. *The Gospel According to Saint Luke*. Kensington, NSW: Chevalier Press, 1997.
- Gonzalez, J. *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance and Use of Money*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990.
- Johnson, L. *The Gospel of Luke*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991.
- Jones, A. (ed) *The Jerusalem Bible*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974.
- Karris, R. "Luke 24:13-35," *Interpretation* 41 (1987), 51-61.
- Koester, H. *History Culture and Religion of the Hellenistic Age*. New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1982.

- Laverdiere, E. *Dining in the Kingdom of God: The Origins of the Eucharist According to Luke*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994.
- Laverdiere, E. *The Eucharist in the New Testament and the Early Church*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996.
- Malina, B. *The Social World of Jesus and the Gospels*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Miller, R. (ed) *The Complete Gospels*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994.
- Neale, D. *None but the Sinners: Religious Categories in the Gospel of Luke*. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991.
- Pearson, B. (ed) *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991.
- Poon, W. "Superabundant Table Fellowship in the Kingdom: The Feeding of the Five Thousand and the Meal Motif in Luke," *Expository Times* 114 (2003), 224-230.
- Schmidt, T. *Hostility to Wealth in the Synoptic Gospels*. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987.
- Smith, D. "Table Fellowship as a Literary Motif in the Gospel of Luke," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 (1987), 613-638.
- Steel, E. "Luke 11:37-54 – A Modified Hellenistic Symposium?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 (1984), 379-394.
- Tannehill, R. *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986.
- Vermes, G. *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*. 3rd ed London: Penguin, 1987.

