



The Servant (who welcomes us)

There's a beautiful story told in all four of the gospels. A great crowd follows Jesus into the wilderness to be near him and to listen to his teaching. They stay with him until late in the day and they are hungry. Jesus asks his disciples where are they to find bread?

Philip responds: "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat? Six months wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little". Andrew brings forward a boy who has five barley loaves and two fish: "but what are they among so many". There are around five thousand people on the mountainside, far from home. What can they do?

How does Jesus respond? First, he asks the disciples to make the people sit down. John tells us there was a great deal of grass in the place. So, they sat down. Take a moment to picture the scene. It's early evening. This great crowd is gathered on the hillside. There is a great stillness. Everyone can see what Jesus is about to do.

And this is what John says next:

"Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated, also the fish; as much as they wanted".

Jesus takes bread, gives thanks, breaks it and gives it to the people. They all have enough to eat and there are twelve baskets of fragments left over.

Much later, on the night Jesus was betrayed, he does something very similar, with the disciples in the Upper Room. Jesus gives to us in this moment a special meal. This is St Paul's description of the Last Supper, the earliest one we have:

"For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread and when he

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had given thanks, broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 10.23-26).

Welcome to Come and See. We’re taking six sessions to explore Holy Communion, the Eucharist, the profound meal which is at the heart of all Christian worship and at the heart of the Christian life. You’re very welcome whether you are new to the faith or whether you have been a Christian for many years.

I hope that together we can discover or rediscover Jesus at the heart of the Eucharist. This sacrament, this sign is his beautiful gift to us. Jesus Christ is present with us as we gather around the table of the Lord. Jesus is present to us in the bread and the wine, in as we listen to the scriptures, as we meet Christ in one another. How do we meet Jesus and how does Jesus meet with us? What does this special meal mean?

Each of these six short films will explore a different way in which we discover Jesus in the Eucharist. This meal is given so we can get to know Jesus better in all these different ways. Every one of them is for beginners in the Christian life and for those who have been Christians many years. We never come to the end of the meaning of this meal. There are daily readings as well which will help all of us explore these themes as part of our learning and our prayer.

But we begin with these two simple pictures: of Jesus on the hillside and Jesus in the upper room. Jesus is first in this meal a servant, a host, someone who welcomes us to Holy Communion.

I don’t know how you picture God. Most of us perhaps begin with an image of an impersonal remote force, a stern figure, a king or a judge or a strict teacher or parent. But one of the most powerful pictures of God in the Bible is the picture of God as a host, a servant at the table.

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There's a story in the Old Testament about the prophet Elijah. He has survived the greatest crisis of his life: an encounter with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. But Elijah is now exhausted, and his life is in danger.

Elijah flees into the wilderness. He comes to sit down under a solitary broom tree, the only place where there is shade. Elijah has completely come to the end of his own resources.

"He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors".

Later in the story the Lord will lead him up a mountain and send an earthquake, wind and fire and then a still, small voice and renew his faith and calling. But that's not the first thing that happens to this exhausted prophet who has come to the end of his strength.

This is the first thing, according to I Kings 19:

"Then Elijah lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat". He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. He ate and drank and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him and said: "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you". He got up, ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God." (1 Kings 19.4-8).

God becomes a servant to his people, who prepares food for the journey. God is servant and host right from the beginning in the creation stories in Genesis, providing food for every creature and for the first man and first woman. God is servant to the people of Israel as they wander through the desert giving them the special meal of the Passover and the manna in the wilderness.

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The prophet Isaiah has a beautiful song in which God is servant and host, calling out and inviting everyone to come and eat – and eat for free:

“Ho everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come buy wine and milk without money and without price” (Isaiah 55.1).

Psalms 23 has two beautiful pictures of the Lord providing for his people. The first is of the Lord as shepherd: He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. The second image remarkably is of God as host, as servant:

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows”

Jesus understands these scriptures and many others about God sending a messenger and a king who is also a servant, who will provide for God’s people.

At his first miracle in Cana of Galilee, Jesus is a guest at a wedding, but the wedding runs out of wine. Jesus becomes the servant and the one who provides for the celebration: six stone jars are filled with water. When the water is drawn out, it is turned to rich, full, beautiful wine bringing joy to bridegroom and bride and all their guests.

On the mountainside Jesus is host and servant, providing for the crowds who come to hear his teaching. At the last supper, John deepens this picture of Jesus as a servant. Christ takes a towel and a basin of water and kneels and washes the feet of each of his disciples. Again, this was the role of the host at the meal. Each is made welcome to the banquet. Each is offered healing and renewal and forgiveness.

And after the resurrection, Jesus remains the servant and the host, preparing a meal for his disciples. Simon Peter and six others spend the night fishing on Lake Galilee but catch nothing. In the morning, they see a

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stranger on the shore who tells them to let down their nets again on the right side of the boat. Instantly their nets are full.

The disciples realise the stranger is the risen Lord. Peter puts on his clothes and jumps into the water and swims to shore. When they reach the shore with the boat full of fish what do they find? They see a charcoal fire there, with fish on it and bread. Jesus says to them: Come and have breakfast. Christ is the servant, the host who welcomes all of us, whoever we are, to this meal.

What does it mean for us to discover Jesus as the host and friend in the Eucharist, to rediscover that every Eucharist is a banquet, and you are the guest of honour at this meal. Christ has prepared this meal for you: to bring you refreshment and spiritual strength when you are weary, to minister to you when you are at the end of your resources, to strengthen you for life's journey.

There is no cost and no charge for this meal. Everyone is welcome. No matter how many times we come. The price has been paid.

Every one of us is here because of grace. We have done nothing to deserve this invitation.

It is a privilege to be here. It is a privilege also to share in welcoming others into this meal. We should welcome everyone as though they are a guest of honour whether they are newcomers to church or faithful members of the congregation. We should especially welcome children because Jesus welcomes children. We should welcome poor and rich together, people of different races and class, people of different sexuality and in different kinds of families: we are all together around the table of the Lord.

Whether our role is to be a steward; or to serve refreshments after the meal; or to serve at the altar or to simply help new people find their place, we all have a part to play in this ministry of host and servant which is the ministry of Christ. Sadly, not everyone finds it easy to cross the threshold of

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a church or to find friendship among the people of God. Each of us has a part to play.

Christ's role as host and servant should remind us that we too are called to offer hospitality in our own homes to one another where we are able. We read in Acts that the early Christians broke bread together and ate in one another's homes (Acts 2.46). This is one of the ways in which the community of the local church is deepened and relationships and friendships grow.

But most of us will also wonder this as we discover or rediscover Jesus as servant and host. What have we done to deserve this. We are unworthy guests, unkind and ungrateful and undeserving of this great love. This is Peter's response in the Upper Room when Jesus kneels to wash his feet. But Jesus persists, tenderly: Unless I wash you, you have no part of me.

One of the most beautiful poems in the English language from the Anglican priest and poet George Herbert catches exactly this sense of unworthiness and Christ as host:

LOVE bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lack'd anything.
'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here:'
 Love said, 'You shall be he.'
'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
 I cannot look on Thee.'
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
 'Who made the eyes but I?'
'Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.'
'And know you not,' says Love, 'Who bore the blame?'

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‘My dear, then I will serve.’
‘You must sit down,’ says Love, ‘and taste my meat.’
So I did sit and eat.

The more we understand of God’s grace, the more we come to Jesus who is servant and host, the more we realise our need of God’s forgiveness. That will be our theme next week as explore the ways we discover Christ as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Come and see.