

# Companions of Christ, eating together ...

## *... combining the spiritual with the social*

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*A sermon given on the Third Sunday of Easter 23rd April 2023 – by Rt Revd Bishop David James, in Beverley Minster*

*Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Luke 24:13-35*

One of the loveliest words in the English language is 'companions'. It means, literally, people who break bread together; people who meet around the table; and eat together; and talk together; who in sharing a common loaf together, bond in a common experience and a common life. We have a friend Awaiz, a Christian from Pakistan and she is sponsored by CMS, the Church Mission Society to bring people together to create community by building bridges of friendship in Seacroft in Leeds. Awaiz brings them together not just to eat bread together, but to bake bread together and to share together as they need, spelt [sorry, that's another bread word, isn't it?] - spelt with a K.

In Acts chapter four, we can read of Peter and John, two of Jesus's disciples causing trouble in the temple in Jerusalem. They have just healed a lame beggar and Peter has followed this by preaching about the risen Christ. The authorities haul them in for questioning and Luke tells us when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realised that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognised them as companions of Jesus.

Eating together is an important feature of many faiths. It's an expression of their common life and an invitation is often extended to others to share in their celebrations. Muslims, for example, have just come to the end of their month of fasting known as Ramadan. When they break the day's fast, they do so together and often invite others to join them. And likewise as they celebrate Eid, Sikhs are justly famed for offering a meal to anyone who comes to the Gurdwara. I wonder whether, unbeknownst to themselves, they have picked up that verse from the end of the letter to the Hebrews, "*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.*" The writer to the Hebrews, of course, is referring back to the occasion in Genesis when Abraham entertained three strangers. Or was it one stranger? Were they angels or was it God himself? The account can't make up its mind. Russian iconography has the best of both options: it's the trinity, God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, companions together. (Rod and Louise McPhee are joining Gill and I for lunch today and I wonder who they really are. Are they angels in disguise? It's a very good disguise, isn't it?)

I sometimes think that we who are Christians have lost something by formalising our companionship into tokens of a meal as we break the bread and drink the cup. Our service this morning is a foretaste of our companionship with Christ in the kingdom of heaven. And so it should be something pretty special, shouldn't it?

An exception (at least to some extent) to those of us who I think have sort of tokenised the Lord's Supper is the Moravian Church, a Reformation church that predated Martin Luther by several decades. Moravians celebrate Holy Communion the same as we do but they also have what they call an Agape - a love feast. They call each other brother and sister and they give expression to being a family by having a Christian family meal together.

Jesus put companionship at the heart of his ministry. He created a band of brothers and sisters who shared their life and their belongings such as they were, together. He was a great partygoer. His enemies called him a drunkard and a wine bibber. Eating together, celebrating together featured in his parables and in his miracles. And God was with him. And on the night he was betrayed he sat down at supper with his friends. It wasn't any old supper. It was part of the national celebration of the identity of the people of Israel as free men and women with their own identity, their own home - they were the family of God by the love and the power of God. So Jesus broke the bread, he blessed the cup. "*Remember me*", he said and he walked out to his death. How could they forget this man who had given them life together - and then it had fallen apart.

And now in our Gospel reading two companions, former companions of Jesus of Nazareth, are wending their way home after the most disastrous few days of their life. A stranger comes alongside. He embraces their pain, their grief and he reinterprets their shared story; puts it into the context of the story of God, of God's companionship with his people. As they arrive back home they remember the rules of hospitality and invite him in for a meal and a bed. At supper, he takes the bread, blesses it and breaks it. And suddenly their eyes are opened and they see - was it the way he broke the bread? Was it the marks of the nails in his hands? They (and we) would love to know more but he's gone. Luke writes for us, *'that same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem and they found the eleven and their companions (that word again) gathered together'*. They told what had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread. And those first disciples carried on from that Easter Sunday evening - our first lesson described the conversion of 3,000 people on Pentecost Sunday and Luke concluded, *'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship to the breaking of bread and the prayers'*. And a few verses further on Luke writes, *'Day by day as they spent much time together in the temple they broke bread from home to home and ate their food with glad*

*and generous hearts'*. I like that phrase - *they broke bread from home to home* - the first known mention in history of progressive suppers.

Eating together is both gift and grace. So to today since lockdown there's been a resurgence of sharing food together in the Minster and I suspect the same could be true for Bar Hill Church near Cambridge beginning this Sunday [*ed. Wendy, our former Associate Vicar, started her ministry in Bar Hill on 23rd April*]

We share a meal together after 08:00 and at The Crossing on a Sunday afternoon and have refreshments before and, if there's any left, after the 0915 service - and the men's group puts a couple of rashers of bacon into their bread!

Can we go further? Can we more intentionally bring together the social and the spiritual, so that Christ, our companion, reveals himself to us in the breaking of the bread.

## Reading Texts

### 2 Luke 24:13-35

<sup>13</sup> Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, <sup>14</sup> and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. <sup>15</sup> While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, <sup>16</sup> but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. <sup>17</sup> And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. <sup>18</sup> Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?' <sup>19</sup> He asked them, 'What things?' They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, <sup>20</sup> and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. <sup>21</sup> But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. <sup>22</sup> Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, <sup>23</sup> and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. <sup>24</sup> Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.' <sup>25</sup> Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! <sup>26</sup> Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' <sup>27</sup> Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. <sup>28</sup> As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. <sup>29</sup> But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. <sup>30</sup> When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. <sup>31</sup> Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. <sup>32</sup> They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' <sup>33</sup> That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. <sup>34</sup> They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' <sup>35</sup> Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

## **Acts 2:14a, 36-41**

*<sup>14</sup> But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: 'Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.*

*<sup>36</sup> Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.' <sup>37</sup> Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?'*

*<sup>38</sup> Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <sup>39</sup> For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.' <sup>40</sup> And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.' <sup>41</sup> So those who welcomed his message were baptised, and that day about three thousand persons were added.*