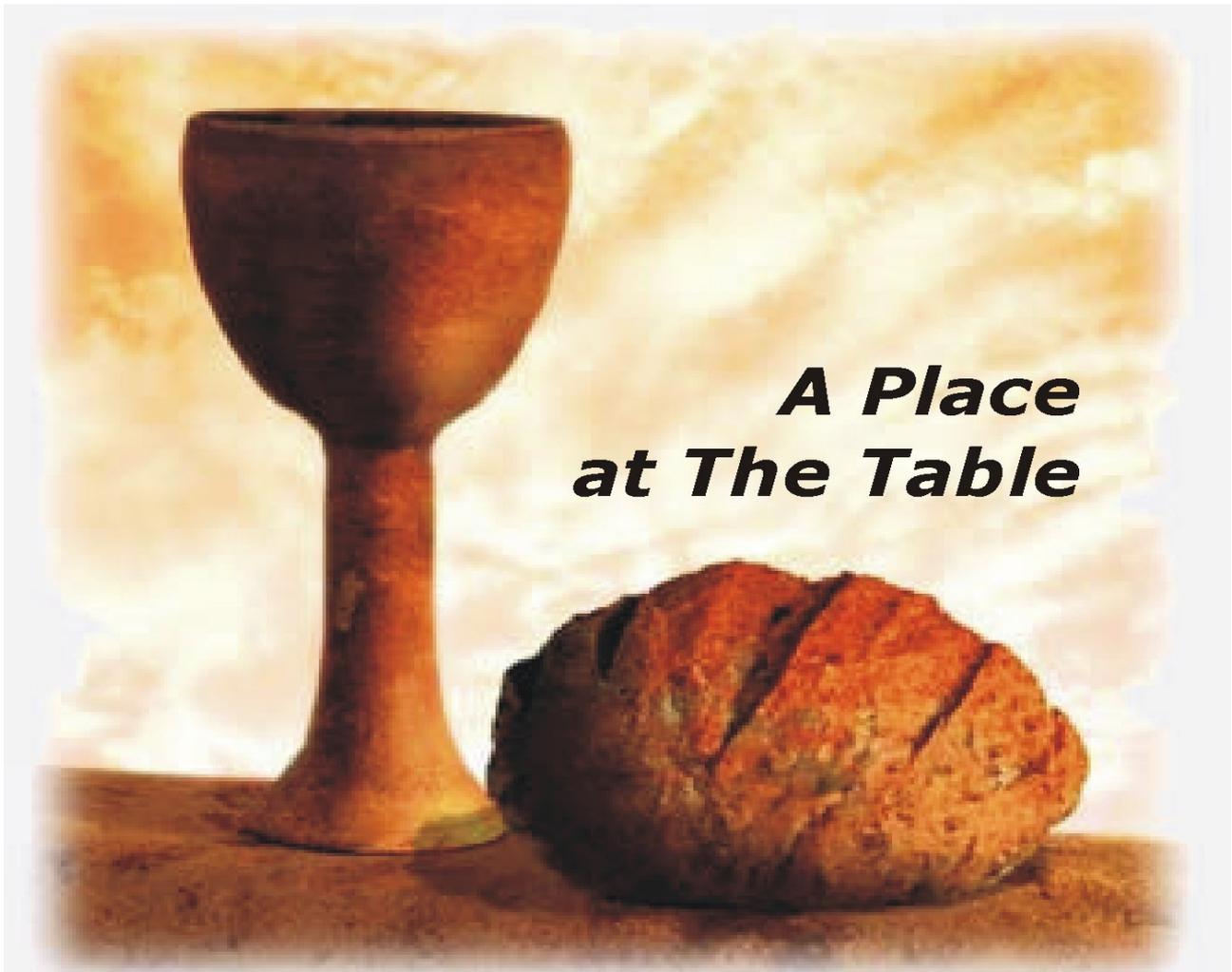


SERMON TRANSCRIPT



Ormskirk Christian Fellowship
Sunday 18 March 2012

A Place at The Table

The Bible doesn't give me a name, but this isn't really about me. It's about a man and a meal.

I lived in what you'd call first century Jerusalem. It wasn't a bad place ... apart from the Roman occupation, the city was thriving like never before. Herod the great had transformed the city like nobody else since Solomon. He'd built palaces and citadels, a theatre and an amphitheatre, bridges and monuments. Although primarily to increase his capital's importance in the eyes of Rome, us citizens of Jerusalem hadn't done too badly out of it either. Granted, there were people in the city more financially well off than I was, but my family and I were doing just fine.

We lived in the southwest corner of the city, a neighbourhood known for its limestone houses sitting almost on top of each other, and the winding dirt streets and alleyways. It wasn't the richest part of town, but the great thing about our neighbourhood was that I could work where I lived and live where I worked. Our small community helped each other building houses together, and we even had our own synagogues where we could go to hear the Scriptures being read and taught. We were weavers, dyers, potters, bakers, tailors, carpenters, metal workers, and olive farmers. And we had plenty of work to do, especially during the great feasts.

Three times a year the city would swell from its normal population of 25,000 to well over 100,000 people, usually for a full week. Fellow Jews who lived outside Jerusalem would come here from all over the place. They had no choice really. Jerusalem wasn't just the thriving centre of commerce; it was the heart of the entire Jewish world.

Once you'd made the difficult ascent from Jericho, as you rounded the Mount of Olives you'd be dazzled by the sight of one of the most glorious structures ever erected – the Temple. That gold and gleaming structure was the heart of the city – and the heart of God's world – it was God's dwelling place. Three times a year all these other Jews who didn't live here made their pilgrimage home, to worship and celebrate in God's city during one of our religious feasts.

I remember it being springtime, and one of the most important feasts was about to start. If you've heard about my people, you probably know our history with the Pharaoh and Moses and our Exodus from Egypt. You might have heard the story about the night when God sent the angel of death to kill every first-born son throughout the land. He told us that we if we Jews slaughtered a lamb, took its blood and smeared in on our doorposts; we would be spared from this horror. The night after God carried out his terrible sentence, Pharaoh was so upset that he demanded we leave, and we had to leave so fast that we didn't have time to even let our bread rise, ready for the next morning.

Every year since then, we've celebrated that event, remembering God's mercy and deliverance by telling the story again to our children, and participating in those same actions; slaughtering a lamb and making bread without any yeast. It's become a feast; the Passover Feast or the Feast of the Unleavened Bread as it's sometimes called. It's one of the most important feasts to our people, an important part of our calendar.

Well, I remember this particular year being no different than any other. There was an enormous amount of preparation to be done. No other festival takes quite as much effort as the Passover does. The first thing we have to take care of, is making sure there isn't the tiniest amount of yeast anywhere in our home. The house has to be turned upside down and cleaned extensively (it's what you'd call Spring Cleaning now). Our utensils, crockery and cutlery had all been used during the year and already come into contact with yeast, so we either had to have a spare set of dishes kept just for this feast, or our utensils and cookware had to be koshered (rendered fit) by dipping them into boiling water. The night before the feast one last thorough search of the house was always done, and any remaining food containing yeast got burned the next morning.

So now, the house was ready. The lamb had been ordered, ready to be purchased the next day, and we'd calculated exactly how much we would need for our family, because the Jewish law said that lamb for the Passover meal must not be wasted or left over – it all had to be eaten.

We'd only been up a few hours that morning, when two men approached our home with one of the servants who had gone to fetch water. They looked familiar. Then I realised that I'd seen them just a few days earlier in the Temple Court. I had gone up to worship and pray, when all of a sudden this guy came up out of nowhere and started flipping over tables where people had been selling doves for sacrifices, and exchanging money. Well, as they all scurried around chasing after the loose coins, I couldn't stop looking at him. There was something different about him, and when he began teaching I was amazed. His message was one I'd never heard before, and these men, the ones coming up to my house, they were by his side – it was them!

As they stepped up to the door, one of them said to me, "The Teacher asks: Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?" (Luke 22:11)

Your teacher wants to have the Passover in my house? I was speechless for a moment, and a bit confused. I'd never actually met him. How did he know that I was watching him at the Temple? Was my reaction that obvious? Had he asked someone to follow me and find out where I lived? No, it didn't seem possible. How had they known to follow my servant? He wasn't even with me that day. Well, I'm not sure what I said back to them, but the next thing I knew I was guiding them through the house, and showing them the upstairs room we had already prepared for our family evening meal.

When I finally plucked up the courage to ask these guys (who introduced themselves as Peter and John) how all this had come about, they told me that Jesus did this kind of thing all the time. He had this knowledge about people they said, and he could see things, know things, do things that no one else could. Even they hadn't quite worked it out yet.

Well, I agreed to their request. They went to purchase enough lamb for their party, then we set about finishing our preparations for the day. I wish there was more time to tell you about these guys – whoa - talk about characters! But that's another story ...

We were just finishing putting the meal on the table when my son came running upstairs to tell me they were here. I'd been preparing for this moment all day long. I can't tell you how glad I was that we'd thoroughly cleaned the house before he showed up. From the moment he walked through the door it was as if this 'presence' had filled our home. It's hard to put into words; in some strange way I was feeling warm on the inside, but had goose bumps on the outside. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end, and I knew when he greeted me that there was something different about this man.

I showed him to the upper room where he and his disciples could eat, but as I started to leave he called me by name. "Please ... I want you and your family to join us." Well, he didn't have to ask twice. Eat with him? I couldn't have been more honoured. I went downstairs to fetch the kids and my wife, then we went back to the room and reclined for the meal. I was accustomed to leading my family through the Passover ceremony and readings, but not that night. I wanted him to have that honour.

He began the feast, and when it came to the time when a child typically asks questions about the meaning of the meal, as had been the custom for centuries, he turned and looked across the room at my son. His eyes were filled with love. His disciples seemed a bit shocked and fell silent as, with a nod, he signalled to my boy to proceed with the traditional questions. My son, with a confidence that I, at the moment, would not have possessed, asked the same questions that had been asked for centuries. I had never seen a teacher of his calibre treat a child with such love and dignity before.

Well, the festivities of the evening continued. The conversation around the table was lively. The appetizers and wine had been served and the main course was now on the table. He hadn't said much during the evening, but on a few occasions, I thought I saw him wipe a tear from the corner of his eye. In a brief moment of silence while everybody's mouths were full, quietly he spoke. "Truly I tell you," he said, looking at the twelve who were gathered around him, "one of you will betray me – one who is eating with me." (Mark 14:18)

You could hear a pin drop. Suddenly everything ground to a halt and one by one his disciples inquired, "Surely you don't mean me?" (Mark 14:19)

"It is one of the Twelve, one who dips bread into the bowl with me" Jesus replied. Well, they'd all been dipping their bread into the bowl. It was a bowl of stewed fruit in the centre of the table. It was normal to dip your bread and even your meat into it. They stopped eating as he continued to speak. "The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born." (Mark 14:21)

"The Son of Man will go?" I wondered. But you've only just arrived in Jerusalem! There are so many people here who need to hear your teachings. We don't have any other teachers like you. And I need you to stay! You saw things about me. You knew where I lived. You've borrowed my house and made my family part of yours for the evening. I want to get to know you better. What do you mean ... one of the twelve will betray you? Point him out! Who's the traitor?

I was confused, I didn't know what to think and I'd suddenly lost my appetite. For a few minutes his disciples went back to eating, but this time in silence. I don't think they knew what to say either, after what they'd just heard.

Jesus broke the silence again. He took some of the matsah, the bread we had prepared without yeast to symbolize our hasty flight from Egypt; he gave thanks to God and broke it and said, "Take it; this is my body." (Mark 14:22) Your body? What do you mean your body? I had no idea what he was talking about, and judging from the expression on the faces of his disciples, I don't think they knew either.

When the food was gone and it was time for the third of four glasses of wine that were served as part of this feast, Jesus took the cup, again prayed a prayer of thanksgiving and then gave it to his disciples. They all drank from it. "This is my blood of the covenant which is being poured out for many. (Mark 14:24)

The idea of drinking blood seemed strange, but that's not what struck me most. He said that his blood was BEING poured out for many. That was definitely the way he phrased it ... BEING poured out. It wasn't something in the past or something in the future; it was something in the present. It was as if he knew it was already underway; this traitor he'd spoken about was up to no good and plans for his death were already afoot. Poured out for many? What did he mean?

Jesus thanked me as they left my house that evening. I walked back upstairs and sat down opposite where he had been sitting; the place of honour at the table where I normally sat. It was a place I would never sit in again. Now, it would always be his. There in front of me were the bread and the wine, or in his words, his body and blood. What had just happened? Who was this Jesus, and why had he seen fit to have the Passover in my house?

In the days and weeks that followed, I spent many hours in that upper room, and it all became clear to me. Jesus was saying that his body and blood were about to be given for the whole of mankind. They were being offered up just like the Passover lamb many centuries before. What he'd done at my table, was to point to the sacrifice that he was about to make of himself.

Passover was never the same for our family again. It couldn't be after what we had witnessed that evening. I was there. I could never have dreamt that God would use my house and my life for such an extraordinary moment in time. I'm so glad I gave up my place at the table.

This morning, in a few minutes time, we're going to share communion together. Before we do, I want to give people a chance to reflect, and to consider again why we are having this meal. This isn't our table; it's the Lord's Table. We have no right to be here based on our own merits, but he invites us to stay; to join him and to share it with one another. We can all have a seat, but only one person can take the place of honour.

This morning, who do you say Jesus is? Will you give him the place of honour in your life?