

Maundy Thursday; April 6, 2023
1 Corinthians 11:23-26
Jesus Gives the Best Meal – and it Lasts

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after the meal, he also took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new testament in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

When was the last time you had a meal you wished would never end? Meals wonderful enough to fit this category are rare, and they usually include at least three qualities: good food and drink, good company, and good surroundings. The food does not necessarily need to be exotic or exquisite, but meals we wish would never end feature fare that is at least delicious; the company does not need to be a movie stars or astronauts, but they should be important and interesting at least to you; and the ambience does not need to include violins and chandeliers, but it should be appealing.

When you put the three together, you have the ingredients for a meal you want to last and last. I remember a lunch on a restaurant roof overlooking Nanjing Street, which is Shanghai’s version of Time Square. We were not eating French cuisine, but it was delicious Shanghainese food that, for once, was not spicy enough to make you see through time. I was eating with university students from Beijing and Christchurch, who were two of the kindest and most interesting people I have ever met. The weather was perfect, and the street below was a stream of people from all over the planet. When we got up to leave, I thought, “That was as close to perfect as a meal could get.” It makes me sad now that the meal is gone, and I can never go back to that lunch, with Yolan and Philip, in that fascinating spot.

The Lord gave the Israelites a wonderful meal. It was called the Passover. Every year in the springtime, the Israelites gathered with family and neighbors. They ate tasty food and drank good wine. It is easy to imagine it being a meal that every Israelite wished would last and last. And the Lord knew they would. Which is why he made the Passover meal last and last. He told the Israelites: **This day shall be a memorial for you, and you are to celebrate it as a festival to the LORD. Throughout your generations you must celebrate it as a permanent regulation.** The Lord commanded the Israelites to observe the Passover every year.

But even if he hadn’t commanded it, they might have done it on their own! It was a meal you would want to go back to again and again. And not just because of the company or the food and wine, but also because of what the Passover remembered and celebrated. On the last night of their bondage in Egypt, the Israelites celebrated the Passover for the first time. On that night, they smeared the blood of their lambs on their doorposts, and when the Lord struck down every firstborn in Egypt, he passed over the homes of those marked by the blood of the Lamb. The blood of the Lamb saved the Israelites from death and slavery.

And every year, for 1,500 years, they celebrated the Passover again and again. As Jesus sits in the Upper Room the night before his death, he is celebrating that Passover meal with his disciples. Then and there, Jesus gives his followers a new meal, even better than the Passover.

The Passover was a meal that looked in two directions. It looked back to a night of life and freedom a millennium and half earlier. But it also looked ahead, with striking parallel imagery, to the sacrifice Jesus

will make the next morning. He is the Lamb of God, who now sees his cross clearly. On that cross the Lamb of God will shed his blood to take away the all the sin of the whole world. Everyone who believes in Jesus' saving work is covered by the blood of the Lamb of God.

The blood of Jesus over every believer frees us from slavery, too. It frees from Satan's control and from the punishment our sins deserve. And it saves us from death. Eternal death passes over every person covered by the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God.

The night before Jesus dies, the Passover celebration is fading away, because the great sacrifice of the Lamb of God that it looks forward to has arrived. So now Jesus gives a new meal, an even better meal. And this meal, too, looks both backward and forward.

It takes us back to Calvary to remember our Savior's sacrifice. We can sort through the remembrances in our minds; some are pleasant and happy, others disturbing and even traumatic; some are sharp and vivid, others foggy and fading. When Jesus takes us back to Calvary with his Supper, he does it in the most personal and striking way possible. He gives not just a picture or recollection of his sacrifice; he gives us the body he sacrificed and the blood he shed.

This is Jesus' own truth, in accord with his own clear and straightforward words. And we do not try – and are not called to! – explain it scientifically. Our Savior only calls us to trust his words: **“This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me...This cup is the new testament in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”** The body he gave to take our sins away, he gives to us with the bread we eat. The blood that sealed the new testament of God's full and free forgiveness, he gives to us with the wine we drink.

So we do not just remember Calvary; we receive the forgiveness and peace with God Jesus earned there with his body and blood. We remember his sacrifice in faith, faith that grows stronger every time we receive his Supper.

But our Lord's Supper does not only look back; it also looks forward: **For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.** As we receive Jesus' body and blood, we also remember that Jesus' body rose on Easter morning. He returned to heaven. And he will be back to take us there. And once we are there, there will be yet another meal. We and all believers in Jesus will dine through eternity at the wedding supper of the Lamb. Jesus the victorious, risen Lamb of God will be the eternal groom, and we, the Christian Church, will be his dearly loved bride.

We are the bride of the heavenly banquet, made perfect and holy through faith in Christ. We are the bride without stain or wrinkle, blemish or defect. And Jesus is our perfect groom, who laid down his life for us and took it back up. The banquet of heaven is a meal you will never want to end. And it won't.

When we come to the altar, we are also looking forward to that eternal feast, and receiving a preview of heaven's joy and we receive Jesus' body and blood and the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus' Supper is the meal that really does never end, because it carries us in faith to the heavenly banquet.

And so Jesus' people are happy and enthusiastic to receive his body and blood, looking back to Calvary in faith, and forward to the heavenly banquet. Because the food is good. So is the company. And so are the surroundings.

As for the food, you could certainly argue that two of the things we receive in Jesus' Supper are quite ordinary. And they are. The wafers come by the hundreds for a couple dollars. And Manischewitz wine is nothing to write home about. But Jesus body and his blood are the best food in the universe. His forgiveness feeds our saving faith until we reach the heavenly banquet, which I am confident will be a far more elaborate spread.

The company is good, too. St. Paul is writing in the plural when he says: **For as often as you [plural] eat this bread and drink this cup, you [plural] proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.** When you commune, you are of course in the company of Jesus Christ. But we are also with each other. We stand shoulder to shoulder as Jesus' family and proclaim his saving work with a unified voice. When we commune, we are with Jesus and with the ones we love. And just like the members of any other family, we may not always like each other, but we love each other. We are brothers and sisters united in the Christian faith. It is the best company you will ever eat and drink with.

But the company we commune with expands even farther. We are also in the family of the Holy Christian Church. When we commune, we are united spiritually to every believer on earth and already in heaven. The company of our Communion includes men and women, Koreans and Russians and Algerians and citizens of nations that you can no longer find on the map. It is a company of generals and bricklayers, kings and peasants, empresses and chambermaids, people with doctorates and others who never set foot in a school. It is a company so big that no one can count it, amazingly diverse.

And yet, as huge and diverse as the Christian Church is, there are some ways in which every member is the same. Every one is a sinner who needs Jesus. And every one is a soul the Spirit has brought to believe in the sacrifice Jesus made. When we receive Jesus' supper and proclaim what he has done, we stand in faith with Jesus' whole Church. It's good company.

And then there's the surroundings. We have a fine sanctuary to commune in, don't we? Yes, these surroundings are great. But when we commune, the Spirit also carries us back to the hill where Jesus died to stand in wonder at his love. And he pulls us ahead in faith to the banquet hall of heaven. We get to be here. We get to be on Calvary. And we get to be in glory. All at the same time. You will never eat a meal in finer surroundings.

Soon enough we will reach that final destination that Jesus won for us. Of course I will never be able to go back to Nanjing Street and eat that good food with Yolán and Philip. But they are Christians, too. So I will eat with them again. An even better meal, with our Savior. In an even more fascinating place than Nanjing Street. And not just with Yolán and Philip and Jesus and you, but with uncountable interesting people from all over the world and throughout history. And that meal will last forever.

Jesus gave us his Supper so that we look back in faith to his sacrifice as we receive his body and blood. And he gave it so that we look ahead to the celebration of heaven. What a meal it is! What food! What company! What surroundings! Thank you, Jesus, for giving us the best meal – and making it last. Amen.