Holy Communion – Week Five
The Lord's Supper: Feasting in the New Creation

Discussion

Putting aside doctrinal correctness for a moment, what would Heaven look like if you could design it?

Christian Hope

The part of theology that focuses on Christian hope is called "eschatology", which comes from the Greek word *eschata*, meaning "the last things". Unfortunately the rich, layered and complex reflection that the Bible's authors and 2000 years of Christian thought have given to this topic is too often caricatured in popular media along the lines summarised in Norman Greenbaum's 1969 hit, "Spirit in the Sky":

When I die and they lay me to rest
Gonna go to the place that's the best
When I lay me down to die
Goin' up to the spirit in the sky.

While it is true that the Bible offers us a positive hope for a glorious future, which it describes as the "kingdom of God" or the "kingdom of heaven", there is nothing simplistic or naïve about Christian hope. There are, for example, several areas of tension that exist within the interpretation of eschatology in the Bible and Christian theology.

- First, there is the question of future vs realised eschatology. To what extent is God's Kingdom already here and to what extent is it still to come? Most Christians would answer that there is a bit of both.
- Secondly, is Christian hope individual or corporate? Does the kingdom of God have to do with new life for the individual, or does it concern social, economic, and political fulfilment? Western Christianity has in the past tended to focus on the former, while liberation theology and theologies in the global South have raised interest in the latter.
- A third area of tension is between the hope of humanity and the hope of the entire cosmos. Is our hope simply for the salvation of human souls or does hope include the renewal of the whole of creation: a new heaven *and* a new earth?
- Finally, we may add a tension between God's action and human action in bringing about the fulfilment of Christian hope. While we may sing the hymn, "All my hope on God is founded", are we nevertheless also invited to participate alongside God in the process of bringing about that hope, founded on God.

This week we consider how the celebration of the Lord's Supper brings us right into the middle of some of these tensions. When we eat at the

Table of the Lord we are not simply looking backwards towards the events in and around Jerusalem 2000 years ago, we are also looking forward towards the situation that exists beyond time in God's kingdom.

Echoes of Eternity in the Communion Liturgy

Even as Jesus was instituting the sacrament among his disciples, he was already challenging them to cast their minds forward to a new age to come.

> Matthew 26:27-29: Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, *I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.*" (Cf Luke 22:14-18, Mark 14:25).

In the first theological reflection we have on the sacrament in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, we are also directed to think about the eschatological implications of the meal: "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26).

There are also several places in the liturgy of the sacrament as we have received it, where there are clear references to the idea that this meal is welcoming us into a space and time that transcends our current reality:

The Introductory Dialogue (Sursum Corda): In the opening lines of the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, we are invited to "Lift up our hearts" to the Lord. Calvin stressed that this was a call for us to recognise the ascension of the risen Christ, and to allow the prayers of our hearts to ascend to that exalted realm with him.

Sanctus: The introduction to this part of the Great Prayer makes it clear that we are here joining our voices to the great, eternal choir of heaven as we sing together, "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest!"

Intercessions: The prayers of intercession are always eschatological in nature because they express our hopes for how things will be changed in the future.

The Lord's Prayer: When we pray "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" as part of the Lord's Prayer, we are giving voice to the ultimate hope for the consummation of all things under the headship of Christ.

***Anamnesis* as Anticipation**

Earlier in this study we discussed the fact that the Greek concept *anamnesis,* which refers both to the general idea that the Eucharist is a remembrance of Christ's passion and to that specific part of the liturgy

where we call to mind that remembrance, is not simply an intellectual exercise but that it is also an active remembrance which brings what is remembered into the here and now as a present reality.

Often in Reformed liturgies – as for example in the "First Order for Holy Communion" of the Church of Scotland's Book of Common Order, which we looked at in the first week – the details of the "work and passion" of Christ which are remembered include elements of his future such as his resurrection and ascension and the promise of his return. Even though the resurrection and ascension happened in historical moments, they are both in some respect beyond time. When these events of Christ's future are also called to mind in the *anamnesis*, then the presence of Christ's future glory, his coming kingdom, is made as real for us as the presence of his sacrificial death. In other words, not only is the past made present, but the future is anticipated as well. Or to put it in yet other terms: *anamnesis* works both forwards and backwards, bringing to us the benefits of his eternal sacrifice ***and*** bringing us into the presence of his glorious future.

Discussion

> ***Why do you think Jesus chose a table as the place where his followers would anticipate his coming kingdom?***

Feasting in Parables and Revelation

The imagery Jesus uses most often in the Gospels to describe aspects of his coming kingdom is that of a banquet, especially a wedding feast. The imagery is used in a variety of ways and to make various points, and, as with all figurative language, one must be careful not to push the analogy beyond its limits. Nevertheless, Jesus clearly believed that a shared, joyful feast was a useful metaphor for understanding aspects of his anticipated kingdom.

Sometimes the reference is oblique and almost incidental, as for example in the case of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) where it is implied that Lazarus may be enjoying a meal with Abraham in heaven. At other times wedding imagery is used without reference to the wedding feast. For example, the bridegroom imagery which we will look at in a moment below.

1) Thanksgiving Feasts : Luke 15

In Luke 15 however, we have a series of parables which collectively suggest that holding a lavish feast is the appropriate response in heaven to the news of the return of a lost sinner. The occasion for the three parables is when Pharisees grumble about Jesus' eating with sinners. In the first two parables the discovery of a lost sheep and a lost coin lead to rejoicing, as should the return of a lost soul in heaven, although the nature of the rejoicing is not described. In the third

parable, of a son who is lost and then returns, the celebration is clearly described as a feast at which no expense is spared.

2) The Great Banquet / Wedding Feast : Matthew 22, Luke 14

The parable of the wedding feast (Matthew 22:1-14) and the great banquet (Luke 14:15-24), which are Matthew and Luke's respective accounts of one of Jesus' stories expressly equate the kingdom of heaven with a banquet. In the story those who are initially invited, reject the host's invitation and are replaced by unexpected and unsuspecting guests.

To this central theme, Matthew and Luke each add a supplementary plot. In Luke, the story is preceded by warnings not to seek out the best seats when invited to someone else's banquet and not to invite only the rich to your own banquet but also to include "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind". Matthew, for his part, adds a cryptic epilogue to his story in which one of the newly invited guests is rejected from the feast for not wearing appropriate wedding clothes.

3) The Bridegroom

In various places in the Gospel, Jesus refers to himself as the "bridegroom", especially when defending the air of celebration and joy that distinguishes his relationship with his disciples in contrast to John's relationship with his disciples or the Pharisees with theirs (Matt 9:14-15; Mark 2:18-20; Luke 5:33-35). John and the Pharisees fast with their disciples, while Jesus and his disciples feast. (See also Matthew 11:16-19 and Luke 7:31-35).

The idea of Jesus being the "bridegroom" is echoed by John when he explains how he understands the difference between himself and Jesus. He (John) is merely the attendant to the bridegroom (Jesus) (John 3:28-30). And then, in Jesus' parable of the 10 virgins and their lamps (Matt 25:1-13), Jesus is the bridegroom who will return at an unknown hour and for whom those who wait should be prepared. In these last two cases no feast is mentioned but merely implied.

4) The Wedding Feast of the Lamb (Revelation 19 & 21)

The frequent reference to Jesus as the Bridegroom in the gospels sets up the use of the metaphor by John in his Revelation. Once the evil Babylon has fallen (Rev 18), the wedding feast of the Lamb is announced:

> "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns.
> 7 Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!
> For the wedding of the Lamb has come,
> and his bride has made herself ready.
> 8 Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear."

> [9] Then the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!"
>
> (Rev 19:6-9)

Two chapters later (Rev 21:2, 9-10) we discover that the New Jerusalem is the bride, beautifully prepared, for her husband, the Lamb (i.e. Jesus).

Summary

Each of the parables mentioned has its own context and purpose which we must not ignore, yet there are certain conclusions we can draw from Jesus' frequent use of the banquet motif.

- The banquet is almost always used as an analogy for life in heaven, or in the age or kingdom to come;
- The banquet is characterized (sometimes even criticized!) as being joyful and celebratory, it is never a sad memorial or a penitential meal of sacrifice;
- Invitation to the meal is entirely at the grace of the host. Indeed the host appears to have arbitrary power to invite or exclude anyone he wishes;
- The eventual guests are often unexpected and unsuspecting – they are not the people we thought would be there;
- Many who presume a right to be at the banquet are excluded: some for rejecting the invitation (Matt 22, Luke 14); some for being unprepared (e.g. the 5 unwise virgins in Matt 25); and some for not entering into the spirit of the feast (e.g. the guest without a wedding garment in Matthew 22 or the older brother in Luke 15).

Conclusion

Returning finally to the Lord's Supper as an anticipation of Christian hope in the final coming of God's kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven", let me reiterate what I have said before: From its earliest inception, the church never held its communal meals on a Friday as a memorial to Jesus' death on the Cross. On the contrary, Fridays very soon became days of fasting and penitence. The shared meal which became what we now know as the Eucharist or Holy Communion was always enjoyed on a Sunday as a celebration of the Resurrection.

When we turn the Lord's Supper into a penitential pity-party and allow it to lose all sense of joy and celebration (frivolity, even?), then we stand in contradiction to the Biblical witness and Jesus' intentions. Then we must beware lest we be ejected ourselves for refusing to don our wedding garments.