

LUKE 7.34: LET'S ENJOY LIFE! LET'S EAT TOGETHER!

Scripture readings: Luke 5.27-32; 7.31-35; Acts 2.44-47

[Chelmsford 29 August 2010]

I love parties – and will find any excuse to have a party.

Would that birthdays came round more than once a year!

I love eating good food, drinking good wine, and just having fun with people. In this respect the great Dutch theologian once said: “*No party is any fun unless seasoned with folly*”.

Jesus too loved parties. Indeed, according to Dominic Crossan, a well-known radical American theologian, Jesus was ‘*the consummate party animal*’.

The Gospels tell us how time and again Jesus accepted invitations to parties.

I have no doubt he was the ‘life and soul’ of every party he attended.

On one occasion he turned 600 litres of water into wine – gosh that wedding feast at Cana of Galilee must have been some party (John 2)!

Yes, Jesus seems to have loved a good party – so much so that the suggestion has been made that as a result of all the eating and drinking Jesus must have been somewhat tubby – a Friar Tuck character if you like.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Jesus got some stick for his love of parties.

Some religious people criticised him for over-indulging. According to Jesus they said, “**Look at this man! He is a glutton and a drinker, a friend of tax collectors and sinners**” (Lk 7.34; also Matt 11.19). Actually, these words of criticism are very revealing.

Jesus was accused not just of being a party-goer, but of going to disreputable parties, associating with crooked businessmen and women of questionable morals.

Here we learn that Jesus was not into parties for the sake of enjoying himself – but rather he was into parties as a way of extending God’s love to those who were deemed beyond the pale.

It was for the sake of the kingdom that Jesus went to parties. Although no doubt Jesus enjoyed eating and drinking, he was an intentional party-goer, in the sense that he was into building bridges of friendship with people who would never have been allowed to have a seat in a synagogue. Jesus was into parties, because he was into making friends with others, big-time.

This morning I want to preach a very down-to-earth practical sermon.

I want to suggest that just as Jesus was often having meals with others, so too should we.

Indeed, the title of my sermon is ‘*Let’s enjoy life! Let’s eat together*’.

1. LET'S EAT TOGETHER AS FAMILIES

Forgive me if at this point I address the members of the congregation who are married and have children. I am conscious that as a church we have many people who are single, and are living on their own. However, just hang in there, if you are single, there will eventually be a word for you too.

But for those of you who are married and have children, let me encourage you to make the time to eat together. To some of you that may sound strange – but the sad reality is that there are many families do who rarely sit down at the dining table together.

According to one American survey of children, when asked how many times *per month* each child sat down to an evening meal together, the average answer was *once!*

In our hectic Western lifestyle, all too often we eat food on the run – life is so busy in the morning, that there is no time for the family to sit down and eat breakfast together, instead people just grab a bowl of cereal before they rush out to get the bus or train; lunchtimes families don't eat together – instead we give lunch-boxes to our children, while we adults eat a sandwich at the desk; and in the evening, family members come back at different times, children have activities, adults have activities – we just help ourselves to food as and when convenient.

Many families don't eat together – indeed in many homes there is no dining table.

If people do eat together, they eat around the TV – although, of course, these days most families have more than one TV, with the result that people eat around different TVs because they want to watch different programmes.

Now I can't pretend that there is a Scripture which says: "families must eat together" – however, I am in no doubt that families who never eat together are the poorer.

They are the poorer together socially – and the poorer together spiritually.

- ***They are the poorer socially***, because they miss out on the opportunity to interact as a family together. No wonder children go off the rails if they never sit down to eat with their parents. OK I recognise that eating together on a daily basis may not be possible – especially if the father is away on business or comes back home late at night.

If that is the case, then what about trying to eat together once a week.

One reason why family life is so strong in Judaism is that once a week, on a Friday evening, the family sits down to eat together, and in that context they talk together.

- ***They are the poorer spiritually***, because in not eating together they miss out on the opportunity for parents to reflect with their children on the issues of the day, and within the context of reflecting on the issues of the day parents can bring a Christian perspective. Every time we have a dedication I read a passage from Deut 6.4-7: **“Israel, remember this! The Lord – and the Lord alone – is our God. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. Never forget these commands that I am giving you today. Teach them to your children. Repeat them**

when you are at home and when you are away, when you are resting and when you are working". But how can influence our children and teach them about God when we are never together? It is has been said that the family that prays together, that stays together. I wish to argue that it is the family that eats together, which is most likely to stay together.

2. LET'S EAT TOGETHER AS A CHURCH

As I look back on this past summer, I look back with particular fondness on two Sundays.

- I remember that very host last Sunday of June when with other churches we came together in Central Park for 'Praise in the Park', and then we all stayed on for 'Picnic in the Park'. It was a wonderfully happy time of togetherness.
- Three weeks later after a Sunday morning service many of us went to Hylands Park for a church picnic – it was a lovely day - and of course we didn't just eat. We talked to one another, we played games with one another – it was an opportunity for making new friendships, as also for developing old friendships.

Alas, all too often we are too busy for friendships on a Sunday.

Sunday mornings are like a game of billiards. We bump into one another, and then ricochet off onto somebody else. 'How are you?', we say, and 'How are you?', but we never expect an honest answer – because we are all too busy, scooping up the children or rushing off to get the lunch on. Certainly as I stand at the door welcoming people, and then fare-welling people, superficiality is the order of the day.

Developing friendships takes time – we need to slow down – and a good way of slowing down is eating together.

Next Sunday we have a church picnic as part of our saying farewell to Emma, Nicholas and Amanda. Let me encourage you to make this picnic a priority.

Let's eat together – and in the eating deepen our friendship with one another.

But we don't have to limit eating together to church picnics.

Let's invite people back to our homes for a meal.

Let me remind you that hospitality is in fact a sacred duty, incumbent on us all.

Time and again we read in the New Testament that we are to practise hospitality.

- The Apostle Paul writes: "**Open your home to strangers**" (Rom 12.13)
- The Apostle Peter writes: "**Open your homes to one another without complaining**" (1 Pet 4.9)
- The writer of Hebrews: "**Remember to welcome strangers in your homes. There were some who did that and welcomed angels unawares**" (Hebs 13.2)

Interestingly, in the NT hospitality is first and foremost about welcoming people we don't know into our homes. Let me encourage each of you here to welcome into your home people you don't already know in the church.

- In May we welcomed into membership Peter & Hazel Beazley, Busola Fashade. Catherine Leppard, Vivienne Moore, Avril Solarin
- In July we welcomed into membership Tobiloba Adegboye Poppy Blake, Joshua Hills, Hannah James, Gerry Gilbert & Julian Wilkinson, and Spencer and Julia Byford – we should have welcomed David Acock, but away that weekend.

What about inviting one or two of these new members into your home for a meal?

Yes, let's eat together as a church – and in the process let's make more friends.

Eating together binds us together as a church – it also attracts others to the church.

I remember speaking to an Anglican vicar who had grown an inner-London church from nothing to 500. I said to him: "How did you do it? What was the secret of growth?". "Lots of red wine and pasta", he replied! I think we can learn from this Anglican vicar!

3. LET'S EAT TOGETHER IN OUR SMALL GROUPS

As a church we have an extensive network of small groups.

At one stage we called them fellowship groups – this term we are experimenting with a new form of small group called 'life groups'.

At the July church meeting I handed out a statement about the purpose:

*"People are looking for community. They are looking for a place to belong. When people are coming to us on a Sunday, they are looking not just for inspirational worship and good quality teaching – they are primarily looking for **friendship**, for a place to live life together.*

- *Life groups are first and foremost about **friendship**, about community, about sharing life together.*
- *Life groups are where people can relax with one another, laugh with one another, and even weep with one another. Life groups are about being real with one another.*
- *Life groups are about caring for one another, being there for one another, praying for one another and offering practical support.*
- *Life groups are about reading the Bible together and discovering how God's Word applies to our everyday lives.*
- *Life groups are about encouraging one another to share the good news of Jesus with others. In life groups we pray for friends and colleagues – and for opportunities to share our faith story with them.*

- *Life groups are about extending **friendship** to others. Life groups want others to join them, even if it means that after a year or so the group may have to divide into two and form two further life groups”.*

Notice the emphasis on friendship – and as a result of this emphasis I have suggested that life groups eat together, if not every time they meet, then at least regularly. Indeed, in this autumn’s mid-week programme I have suggested that life groups eat together at least three times:

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| Sept | 15 | Let’s eat together Italian (e.g. pizza, pasta, pastrami)! An opportunity to make friends as well as renew friendship. |
| Oct | 27 | Let’s invite friends to eat with us – the friends I have in mind are those who do not normally attend a small group |
| Dec | 15 | Let’s invite more friends to an Advent Supper |

In my notes to the nurture team, I wrote: “*Note the emphasis on eating together. Pasta is a cheap option – Tesco do a pasta bake for four people + a side dish + dessert, all for £5! Morning groups could have ‘coffee and Danish’ or ‘coffee and cup-cakes’; afternoon groups might lay on ‘afternoon tea’*”

The important thing is not what we eat –but that we do eat together; that we do not simply enjoy friendship with one another, but that we invite others to come and share the friendship.

4. LET’S EAT TOGETHER WITH FRIENDS OUTSIDE THE CHURCH

If we are to be true to the spirit of Jesus, then we cannot just eat together as families nor can we just eat together with church people – we need to eat together with people outside the church. We need to eat together with neighbours, with colleagues, with people who don’t go to church – who think that church is not for them.

Nick Cuthbert in his consultation report on our church wrote of the need for us to ‘*rekindle missional culture*’. Instead of being what he calls ‘*well-intentioned consumers*’, we need to ‘*see day to day witness as a key*’ to our lives. In this regard he says: “*Let new membership be seen as joining a body of people who have a vision not only to be a warm and loving community, but one that is passionate to reach others*”. He goes on: “*Encourage lots of inviting of non-Christians into homes for meals*”. That is what I want to do this morning. Encourage lots of eating together with friends outside the church.

It is not enough to have hospitality Sundays, when we invite people from within the church into our homes – perhaps we need to have hospitality Sundays when we invite people from outside the church into our homes.

If we are honest, I guess that this is something that many of us don't find easy.

Matters are not helped because we are all so busy at church. According to Michael Prior, who wrote a popular commentary on 1 Corinthians: there is a "*desperate need for Christians to excise innumerable church meetings, in order to free their diaries for proper meeting with unbelievers*". He went on, Jesus' model of ministering to people of all backgrounds "*challenges us to cross the culture- gap between the Christian sub-culture of cozy meetings and holy talk and the pagan culture of our local community. The task of identification with and incarnation into our contemporary paganism, of all kinds, is one of the biggest tasks confronting the church*". I have a book on my shelves entitled '*Contagious holiness: Jesus' meals with sinners*'. A reminder that people will never be able to 'catch' the difference Jesus makes, unless we make friends with them, and the best way to make a friend is over the dinner table.

To return where I began: Jesus loved to go to parties – he loved to eat and drink, and in eating and drinking he expressed God's love toward others.

Jesus offers a model to you and to me! So, let's not only 'enjoy life' but also 'eat together'.