

## Clustering around the table I I Corinthians 12:12-26

Think about what we like about eating.  
Then ponder what church would be like if we always included it when we met.

Paul is writing to a group of churches in Corinth – maybe 100 people at most – who almost certainly ate together every time they met. Certainly our earliest evidence of Christian activities from a non-Christian witness – the letters of Pliny the Younger written about 110-112AD tell us that the Christian groups he encountered met regularly to share a simple meal together and worship Jesus.

### I) meals with a meaning

We gather around tables at home and in restaurants to celebrate, catch up, share news and generally be together. Shared meals are:

- ✓ convivial – there's nothing like food, drink, time and attention for making us feel good and getting to know one another – it's why Jesus spent more time at parties than in church!
- ✓ Community-building – who I eat with is far more significant than who I meet with. It's round the meal table that I forge the relationships that give shape and meaning to my life

The problem at Corinth that Paul tackles in 11:17-34 is that his first hearers had forgotten or chosen to ignore this. Their meals were an opportunity for creating division through one-up-manship: the rich who arrived early because they didn't work eat everything and get drunk; while the poor who arrive late because they work till sundown, go hungry because there's nothing left: v21-22. This is a scandal, says Paul, that does more harm than good: 17b, 20b.

### 2) meaning of this meal

The Lord's Supper is as much about my relationship with the person next to me as it is about my relationship with God. There's a Yoruba proverb that says: 'it is food that is shared together that tastes well.' Communion is about two things:

**i) looking up:** remembering Jesus, reflecting on meaning of his death, renewing my trust in it for my life now – hence the liturgy of 11:23-25

**ii) looking round:** I do not eat this meal and remember Jesus alone, however, but with others:

- ✓ Proclaiming (26): for all sorts of reasons non-believers would be present at this meal – serving it, passing through, related to the host, an invited guest, someone who has dropped in unannounced. For all these folk the meal itself will tell them the substance of the Christian faith
- ✓ Discerning (27-32): who are the people I'm sharing this meal with, how can I build their faith by how I share in this act? Eating unworthily is about not being in the right relationship with my dining companions; about doing what Paul outlines in 17-22! Such abuse mocks cross: Jesus served us, so we should serve one another – that means being aware of and meeting one another's needs (very practically – the Corinthian supper was probably a pot-luck supper, so the rich need to share their

abundance with the poor because it might be their only way of eating today).

- ✓ Welcome/wait for one another – we each host each other at this meal; we each ensure that one another eats her fill and is strengthened and built up in her faith

### 3) places to gather

Think about what is the one physical asset we have that will help us build faith and make Jesus known in our town?

Where did early Christians meet? Homes – I Cor 16:9; Ro 16:5 (23); Ph 2; Col 4:14 plus tons of refs in Acts – 2:47; 5:42; 11:3; 16:15, 31-34, 40; 18:7f; 20:7-12; 28:30:

The home is where Christians gathered for prayer, teaching, Lord's supper – ie 'church' what were homes like? Varied but basically two types:

- ✓ Atrium/peristyle houses tended to be spacious with plenty of room for civilized living. They might or not have had a shop at the front or a workshop at the rear.
- ✓ Apartments that might be either the first floor of atrium-style homes or rooms at the back of or above workshops

What were homes like?

**i) households and housefuls:** a family (possibly 3 generations), their slaves and freed-persons who worked for them would all have lived together. In addition many with larger style houses rented space to make ends meet, so other 'families' shared facilities/entrances – this means that some large houses were pretty full and had people of various social levels living very close to each other.

**ii) high traffic:** through the day all sorts of people would be coming and going: clients (if the householder was rich or influential), customers (buying goods from the shop or ordering goods from the workshops) and the curious

**iii) hierarchical:** there were rules about who can go where in a home at what time. Some areas were always private (such as bedrooms) others were public (the atrium where early morning greeting happened or deals were done). Some of the rules governed contact between sexes – some areas of homes (especially at the eastern end of the empire – where Corinth was) had areas of the home that were reserved for men-only or women-only and other areas where at certain times of the day – evening meals, for instance, in the triclinium (dining room) – both sexes could mix.

**iv) holy:** homes were where most worship happened – shrines to household gods were very common, libations and prayers would be said before morning and evening and often when a significant deal was entered into.

### 4) lessons to learn

In such spaces the first Christians gathered in groups of no more than 30-40. Not everyone in the home – or even at the gathering – would have been a Christian because the gatherings (being round the meal table) would have been public. This domestic space shaped the Christian faith as we know it.

One key lesson: most of us have the vital asset needed to build the faith of believers and make Jesus known to outsiders – our homes How could we be using them to further Kingdom of God in the light of all we've thought about so far?