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Last Supper: A Kingdom Perspective

K.V. MATHEW*

A meal in the Oriental world is an occasion to express friendship, fellowship and close intimacy with one another. Usually it is confined to within one's own clan or community. If it is open to others outside the immediate circle, it means new and wider friendship is established. Meal stands for unity, caring and provides an opportunity to serve others in humility. The participants are friends and cannot be foes. If they act unfriendly, that is regarded as an unforgivable act. Jesus' painful response to such a one is recorded in Matt. 26.23-24.

Jesus, being a Palestinian Jew recognizing the social significance of a meal, attended feasts on many occasions and hosted a very significant meal himself. He ate with Pharisees and publicans and with 'sinners' of the society. Some of his 'respectable' friends could not accept Jesus' outgoing mentality to share meals with 'not-so-respectable' people. Some of them accused him for 'eating and drinking with sinners'. No respectable Rabbi would ever behave in a similar way. They keep a distance from such in public. Jesus' eating with others signifies a unique aspect of the mission for which he stood for.

Context of the Gospel

Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom of God (Mk. 1.14-15). 'The time has come. The Kingdom of God is near. Repent (return) and receive the Gospel'. This announcement came when the Jews were losing hope whether they would ever break the yoke of the imperial Rome and be freed from their iron hands. Would the liberating God of Moses appear again? They were reasoning within themselves. Then Jesus, the Galilean sage and Rabbi, appeared

**Rev. Dr. K.V. Mathew is a Professor of Old Testament at Aizwal Theological College.*

on the scene. Are you the Prophet? The people queried implying that Jesus was Moses (cf. Dt. 18.18). The proclamation of the kingdom of God aroused their expectation. 'Turn to God, acknowledge His rule', Jesus appealed to the people. He had like Isaiah the vision of God reigning (Is. 6.1-12). He knew that God is in control of history. John the Baptist announced God's judgement. He was shut up in prison. His voice was no more heard. It was then Jesus came proclaiming God's reign. That announcement was the Good News for the people at that time.

Gospel becomes good news only for people who live under an oppressive structure, expecting deliverance. Deliverance may not be possible by human hand and they want God to intervene. Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God, therefore, became a Good News for the people. The same Good News becomes bad news for those who oppress the people. The oppression and the consequent slavery appear in different forms. It appears in the form of political oppression and corruption. Jesus and his fellow Galilean peasants experienced its bitterness from the political structures of Roman imperialism and the religious bigotry of the fanatic Jewish oligarchy in Jerusalem. The people of the land (*am aretz*), the hungry and marginalised, longed for deliverance. The Pharisaic religion declared the lepers, women and the Samaritans as outcastes. Poverty led to illness and death. Many were frustrated and bewildered and became insane.

The announcement of the Gospel by Jesus did not come with mere words. The kingdom of God erupted with power, the powerful words of authority threatened the powers that were. For them, the Gospel was a bad news. The *Hasid* (beloved of God) of Nazareth who was one among the peasants of Galilee and who shared the pains and anxieties of the poor, made his voice heard in Palestine on behalf of the oppressed, the sick and the hungry, women and children, the marginalise and the outcastes. He accepted them all to his table fellowship.

Meal in the Kingdom of God

It was in the common meal that he shared with others, Jesus visibly acted out the true meaning of the Kingdom of

God on earth. In the meal all the marginalised and the untouchable were accepted as friends and equals. Jesus addressed his disciples comrades. He showed that all are equally acceptable and respectable in the Kingdom. His wonderful deeds were the sings of the Kingdom. The meal fellowship was the most outstanding among them.

The Last Evening Meal

The last supper, according to Synoptic witness coincide with the Passover feast. Jesus was about to be delivered into the hands of his enemies for crucifixion and death. According to Luke, the death of Jesus was referred to as 'Exodus' (Lk. 9.31). In the context of this 'Exodus', this Supper may be considered as an acted parable. Jesus is now sharing a meal with the 'Exodus community' who have witnessed the power of God over the powers of chaos, oppression and slavery. They are God's people in the Kingdom. In the deeds of Jesus, they saw 'the mighty hand and an outstretched arm' of the LORD afresh, for the sake of his people. While having the meal, Jesus said, 'I will not eat the meal again until it finds fulfillment in the Kingdom of God' (cf. Mk. 14.25, Lk. 22.16, Mt. 26.29). No doubt, the last supper was a meal of the Kingdom of God.

Sacrament Significance

The menu of the evening meal consists of *Lahama* and wine, a very usual meal in a Palestinean peasant home. *Lahama* means the staple food of the people. The home-made juice of grape was not meant to get intoxicated, but it served as a drink in the meal time. *Lahama* may be compared to the Indian *Chappathi* or the Arab's *Khubus*. It is larger and thicker than *Chappathi*. Never it meant 'Bread' in the Palestinean context.

Meal stands for subsistence for life. It is must for all, and every one has a right for it. No one should be deprived from this fundamental right. Some remain sumptuous and others go hungry. That cannot be in the Kingdom of God (cf. 1 Cor. 11.20-22). Here Jesus is sharing a real meal with his disciples (Jn. 6.55). It is not a spiritual food and not intended for

spiritualising. It is in this spirit that William Booth approached the people with 'Soap, soup and salvation'. Spiritual, if not translated into the material, is of no use to humanity. Food for me is material and for my neighbour it is spiritual. Jesus cared for the whole man and not merely for his spirit.

Prof. Daud of Oxford, a scholar in Jewish and Roman Law once shared in a conversation, that it is quite possible for Jesus to have taken 'Aficoman' (a Lahama set apart in every Jewish home for the Coming one-the Messiah) and identified it with himself saying, "This is my body", thereby declaring his messianic vocation through an act. It is important to note that Jesus is revealing to us the meaning of the Kingdom of God in the sharing of our daily food.

The announcement of the Kingdom was in response to his perfect obedience to God, his Father. God's will was declared in Dt. 15.4-5, 'There will be no poor among you in the land, the LORD your God is giving you, if only you fully obey the LORD'. In the renewed covenant community Jesus wanted to show that there won't be any poor. He says, 'Happy are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Happy are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied' (Lk. 6.20-21). The meaning of the Lords table is to be understood in the context of this saying of our Lord. The meal was a demonstration of the life-style of the covenanted community.

Words of Institution

The words of Jesus always accompany acts. His acts reveal his words. "He took *Lahama*, gave thanks, broke it, gave to his disciples saying, take it; this is my body. He took the cup of wine, gave thanks and offered it to them saying, this is the blood of the covenant which is poured out for many" (Mk. 14.22-24, 1 Cor. 11.23-25).

The food we eat daily is the product of human labour particularly of the peasants and agricultural labourers. They sow the seeds of grain on earth. God provides rain and light. Knowing this fact, Jesus gives thanks to God, the Creator and sustainer of us all. "The earth is the LORD's and everything in it" (Ps. 24.1). Not only food, but all the resources of the

Universe-earth, air, water, space, fire-are common to all and no one can make any claim over it. Jesus broke *Lahama* and distributed among his disciples saying, this is given for you not only for you but for 'many'. Resources and necessities for life in the Kingdom of God are meant for all and not to be hoarded by the few. According to one's need the resources are shared (Acts. 2.42-47, 4.32-35).

Taking the cup Jesus said, 'This is the blood of the covenant'. There was a custom of covenant renewal ceremony among the Jews. Jesus, being initiated as a *Bar Mitzwa* and recognized by others as a Rabbi, was well versed in the covenant tradition of Israel. He translated the Last Supper into a 'covenant renewal ceremony.' He identified himself with the sacrificial animal offered for the renewal of the covenant. The participants in this meal become the members of the renewed covenant community (1 Cor. 10.16-18). The Last Supper is thus to be understood as a covenant renewal act, a continuation of the Sinaitic covenant God made with the people of Israel. By this meal Jesus was affirming the true covenant tradition of Israel initiated by God through Noah and Abraham. (cf. Gen. 9.9-11, 17.1-22). Jesus, by this meal opened the covenant relation to other people as well. The expression 'many' indicates that the covenant is no more only for Jews but for all who participate in the meal of the covenant renewal ceremony. God's covenant with Abraham was not meant for Israel alone, but for all those who share the faith of Abraham, so that the covenant community may be a blessing on earth (Gen. 12.2-3).

Jesus spent his life for others. He was a blessing for all. The Jews and the gentiles, the aliens and the natives, women and children, poor and rich, the untouchables and the outcastes, all drank from the life poured out by Jesus. His life was a *Qurbana* (offering) offered for the world. What he said by pouring the cup, was exactly an action of his life. The Kingdom of God was manifest in the midst of the people through the life and ministry of Jesus.

With Jesus, the covenant community began its pilgrimage. It was not a new community, but a renewed covenant community that began its journey with Noah and Abraham. Jesus' community was the manifestation of the people of God.

It is significant to note that Matthew and Mark do not use the word 'new' before the term 'covenant'. (Mt. 26.28, Mk. 14.24). It is quite possible that mss. of Hellenistic origin added the word 'new' before the covenant (cf. Lk. 22.20, 1 Cor. 11.25). Luke being a companion of Paul shares the Pauline tradition. While the Jewish Christians of Palestine take the last supper as a meal of the covenant renewal ceremony, the Hellenist Christians who did not share the Hebrew tradition, take it as the inauguration of a 'new covenant'. This is the beginning of a shift of emphasis. Nevertheless, Paul wanted the Gentile Christians to be part of the Palestinean tradition (cf. Rom. 11.11-24).

Covenant Breaking

It is under the shadow of the disloyalty to the covenant relation that Jesus hosts the covenant meal. He knew that one of the disciples would betray him, the master/Guru. The Synoptic Gospels without exception bear witness to that 'cloud of betrayal that was looming large over the fellowship meal of the Kingdom'. The disciples were anxious to prove their innocence before their Guru and affirm their loyalty to him.

The forces at work against the Kingdom and the covenant community are not from outside. They are from within and they break the covenant fellowship. We may 'dip the morsel' with the Lord at the meal, but that is no indication that we are loyal to him. While creating division within the fellowship and being disloyal to Christ, we may participate in the Lord's table. That is an obvious way of breaking the covenant community and the covenant relation with God. The uniting factor in the community is our loyalty and devotion to the Master.

Honouring Fellowmen

In the realm where God is the Ruler, there is no place for discrimination, division and disregard. All are equal and equally respected. Possessions, positions and erudition are no criteria for treating people differently. Selfish ambitions may be there to climb the ladder to better positions and to get

better treatment. Realising the ambitions of his disciples, Jesus prescribes new criteria for greatness among his disciples. Services of humility for the sake of others is the way one becomes great in the Kingdom of God (cf. Lk. 22.24ff, Mk. 10.39-45, Jn. 13.17).

The table of the Lord is not an occasion for humiliating others. A community that not fully acknowledged the meaning of the Kingdom experience may slight others at meals. Paul says, 'Do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? It should not be' (1 Cor. 11.22). Since the meal is for all in the community, no one should be treated with contempt or disrespect, nor any special treatment is given to any on account of their possession or position. The rich and the poor, the scholar and the illiterate, men and women—all are equal partners where God's rule is acknowledged through the Gospel of Christ.

Because of our disobedience to the law of God and disloyalty to the covenant relation, disparity may continue in the community (cf. Dt. 15.7-11). but the covenant renewed community cannot remain indifferent or inactive in the face of such injustices in the community under the rule of God. The word-deed of Christ must constantly be the mode of action in such situations.

In Remembrance of Me

Paul and Luke alone record that the Lord's table is to be continued 'in remembrance' of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 11.24-25, Lk. 22.19). According to John, the humble service which Jesus had demonstrated through the washing of the feet of his disciples, be continued (Jn. 13.14-15).

Among the Jewish community the covenant renewal was known and practised. The Covenant which God made with Israel at Sinai was renewed by Joshua at Ebal and Shechem (cf. Josh. 8.30f, 24.1ff). But the Hellenistic Christians had no such practice as their heritage. This might be the reason why the Pauline tradition directs the community to continue the practice of celebrating the Last Supper 'in remembrance' of Christ. Luke again follows the Pauline tradition. Paul also adds, 'For whenever you eat this bread and drink the cup, you

proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Cor. 11.26). It is noteworthy that Paul here makes a shift of emphasis in the observance of the Lord's supper. No more it is a celebration of the meal of the Kingdom but a meal proclaiming the death of Jesus Christ. None of the Synoptic writers give their consent to Paul in this regard. The Christian church, now follows the Pauline tradition rather than the Synoptic tradition.

Now let us see the meaning of the word 'Remembrance'. The root word in Aramaic is *Dkrana* and its Hebrew equivalent is *Zeker*. It is through the Greek and Latin rendering of the word that we have in English 'Remembrance' which brings before us a reminder, a repetition of the Lord's Table. If this is the word uttered by Jesus, it must have been in his own mother tongue and the meaning of which is quite different from the understanding that we get through the word 'Remembrance'. *Dkrana* stands for a visible present reality. The object of the word is 'Me', i.e. Jesus Christ, if so whenever we celebrate the Lord's Table we see Jesus and his disciples sitting at the meal of the Kingdom. So the meal is not a repetition of the past event, the first Last Supper 2000 years ago, but it is a visible reality of Christ's sharing the meal in the Kingdom of God here and now. It is a demonstration of the 'here and now' of the Kingdom of God in our midst. It is an expression of Christ's fellowship, equality, unity, mutual concern and care for one another, a mark of humble service and a sign of the living people of God on earth.

Accretions added to the 'Kingdom meal' by the gentile churches have made the Lord's Table a sacrifice, 'a mystery meal and eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Jesus Christ' like the primitive Gentiles sharing the life of their god' in a sacrificial meals. A joyous meal of the renewed community of the covenant on the basis of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus of Nazareth, has now been converted into a 'cultic ritual' like other religions with mythical motifs in which believers eat the flesh and drink the blood of their God. What a travesty of truth?

Now we have to remind ourselves the meaning of the prayer Jesus has taught us, 'let your Kingdom come, let your will be done on earth as in heaven'. The table of the Lord, is the

constant reminder that we have to share the experience of the rule of God in our midst. Jesus of Nazareth who proclaimed the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, the father, and demonstrated it in power, demands us to translate the Last Supper as a demonstration of the rule of God in our day. Whenever we participate in the 'Meal of the Kingdom' hosted by Jesus Christ our Lord, let us pray, 'Hasten O Lord your kingdom as a reality on earth'.