

Guess Who's Coming for Dinner?

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[0 : 0 0] And while the children go out, I encourage you to open again the Bibles at page 808 to Matthew 26.

And we're beginning a sermon series today in the morning services that will take us through to Easter from this last section of Matthew's Gospel. So let's pray as we come to this passage.

Our Heavenly Father, speak to us from your word, we pray. Write it on our hearts that in our lives we may never deny or desert the Lord Jesus, but live for his glory. Amen.

It was probably a bit like our Christmas dinner, the ancient Jewish Passover meal. The most important meal of the year, I guess. Sort of strong traditions and rules and regulations about how you celebrate.

And, you know, we all have different family traditions and rules about what you eat and what you wear and what you open and all the timing of all that sort of rigmarole. And it was a bit the same for the ancient Jews of Jesus' day.

[1 : 1 1] In Jesus' day, in Jesus' day, the Passover meal was largely a pilgrimage feast. So the men in particular, but women and children were welcome, would go up to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast.

And they would eat the feast. And they would eat the meal within the walls of Jerusalem, although they might stay outside the walls overnight. It was a strong family connection, but extended as well.

So there would be others who would be part of a gathering together for a meal. A set menu, set prayers and liturgy as part of that, etc.

The reason for its significance was that it looked back to the great act of redemption for the Israelites. In about 1450 BC, through a series of miraculous plagues under the human leadership of Moses, God brought his own people out from slavery in Egypt, firstly into the wilderness and then ultimately into the promised land a generation later.

The Passover was one of three main feasts and one, like all of them in some sense, looked back to these events. The Passover in particular looked back to the final of the plagues, where God commanded Israel to have this Passover sacrifice meal, to put blood from the animal on the doorpost and God would pass over those houses as he killed the firstborn of the Egyptians before the Israelites escaped and fled from Egypt to cross the Red Sea and into the wilderness.

[2 : 5 0] But it also looked forward. It looked forward in its prayers and in the original event to Israel arriving in the promised land, the land of God's blessing, a land of freedom.

That was its future orientation. So it wasn't just past escape, but it was looking to the future as well. Well, Jesus and his 12 disciples come to celebrate the Passover.

They're in Jerusalem. They've been there for a little bit of time, a few days. It's not the first time that Jesus has come to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. John's Gospel records probably a couple of previous occasions.

But it is Jesus' last time, as we know so well, and as he knew also. The disciples asked him on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, as it's called in verse 17.

Literally, the Passover was the beginning of a week-long festival, which was generally called the Feast of Unleavened Bread. But the particular first day was the Passover day.

[3 : 54] And they asked Jesus about making preparations. The house where you would celebrate this must be cleaned of all yeast. Maybe that the man whose house they go to has already done that.

Maybe the disciples did that. That's because the idea of being unleavened is because of the haste with which Israel left Egypt under Moses.

No time for leaven or yeast to raise the bread. Just unleavened bread. Quickly made, quickly cooked. So all the yeast was to be cleaned out of the house.

And unleavened bread was a part of the Passover meal. As well as that, other preparations. Gathering various fruits together. Mixing them into a sort of paste or puree.

Into which you dip your bread and so on. Part of that suggests the mortar with which the bricks of the buildings that they're enslaved to build. That's the symbolism of that.

[4 : 53] There'd be salt water and bitter herbs to recall the bitterness of their life as slaves back in Egypt. All those years ago. And though there's no mention of those things or even the lamb here.

The lamb was the main part of the meal. There's a bit of debate about whether this was actually a Passover meal that Jesus celebrated. Or whether it was a day early. We won't go into that debate here.

There's no mention of lamb. But we assume there was something like that, if not lamb. The lamb was symbolic of the lamb that would be killed and eaten. The blood of which would go on the doorposts to indicate to God a trust that God would pass over their house.

While he killed the firstborn Egyptians, as I said. Not told here, but elsewhere. Somewhere in other Gospels, it's an upper room that they go to. An upstairs room.

Somewhere within the walled city of Jerusalem. Jesus says to the disciples after they ask about the preparations. Go into the city to a certain man who's not named here.

[5 : 58] And say to him, the teacher says, my time is near. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples. And so the disciples did as Jesus directed them. And they prepared the Passover meal.

And when it was evening, Jesus took his place with the twelve. This is meant to be a great celebration. It is meant to be a meal of festivity, food, prayers, praise, hymns, joy.

Looking back and looking forward. But this meal, as we're told it in Matthew's Gospel, is bracketed by betrayal.

Immediately before it, in verses 14 to 16, we're told that Judas goes out and negotiates with the chief priest and others 30 pieces of silver with which to betray Jesus.

Jesus and the disciples humanly don't know this. But we're told it in the verses preceding. And the end of this meal, Jesus is warning that all the other disciples will deny him and desert him.

[7 : 11] So as we read this meal that's meant to be joy and celebration, this shadow is cast over it of betrayal and denial.

For now, Judas' actions are secret, although we've been told in verses 14 to 16. And yet Jesus knows. He knows who will betray him.

Presumably a supernatural knowledge that God has given him. So Jesus, in the middle of this meal, that's meant to be joyful and relaxed, says, Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.

Now that's enough to throw the spanner in the works for a nice meal, isn't it? You've probably had Christmas dinners where there's lots of tension and argument, maybe even somebody storming out and slamming the door.

I've had that sort of thing in the past. And you may have as well. And in effect, Jesus' words would suddenly shatter the sort of relaxed, joyful atmosphere of this meal.

[8 : 16] One of you will betray me. And they, the disciples, became greatly distressed. We can understand that. They recognise that Jesus has knowledge of things that is supernatural.

And you can understand their distress thinking, Is this going to be me? And they ask him, Surely not I, Lord? A question that begs the answer, No, no, not you.

Not you. Jesus continues in verse 23. The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me.

Now it's unclear whether Jesus is simply rephrasing what he's already said. One of you will betray me. One of you who's dipped your bread in the bowl. Which may mean all of them.

That is, he may simply be saying the same thing but in a different way. It certainly adds a poignancy to it. Because it's not just one of you will betray me. But here we are eating a meal together in a census family.

[9 : 22] We're dipping bread in the same bowl. One of you is going to betray me. But maybe Jesus' words here sharpen the focus a bit more.

Now, you know if you go out to a meal and there's 20 people and you've got this long table in a restaurant, you may well have two or three or four all along the table sets of sauces or condiments or little bowls of bread or something like that.

So if you're at one end of the table and friends are down the other end, you may not actually literally take bread from the same bowl or dip it in the same sauce because of the length of the table. So in saying this, Jesus may be narrowing the focus.

He's certainly adding an element of intimacy to it. You've dipped your bread in the same bowl and yet you're going to betray me. Whether he's referring to any of the 12 or just to a few who are sitting right next to him.

And it's possibly the latter as we'll see in a minute. Jesus then goes on to say in verse 24, The Son of Man goes as it is written of him.

[10 : 37] The Son of Man is a title Jesus frequently uses of himself. And he says he goes alluding to his coming death as it is written, as it's been determined, as God has decreed.

He may not be referring to a specific passage of scripture where this is written, but the Old Testament, not least in the prophets of Isaiah, looks forward to the servant of God who will die, despised and rejected.

A clear prophecy of Jesus who dies for the sins of many to make many righteous. If not that specific passage, in general, Jesus is saying God has determined that the Son of Man will die.

That's his destiny. But then he says, Woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. Now these are difficult words.

It's difficult to get our minds around the two aspects of what's being said here. You see, we might say, yes, in God's sovereign plan for the salvation of the world, he decreed that his Son would die.

[11 : 51] He sent his Son to die for us. And therefore you could say, a logical step might be, that anyone who helps towards that plan, even by betraying Jesus to enable his death, they're actually accomplishing God's will.

But the logic breaks down. Even though this is God's plan, written and determined and decreed by God, that Jesus his Son should die for the sins of the world, the one who perpetrates betrayal to enable that to happen, to that person, woe.

That is the end, salvation for the world, does not justify the means, betrayal for 30 pieces of silver. That is the action of the betrayer is not exonerated or condoned because it brings about God's purpose.

Woe to that one. And indeed, so severe is this word of woe, Jesus says it would be better if he'd never lived. Now there are some who suggest that our ultimate destiny is either heaven, a conscious existence of joy in the presence of God, or nothing, annihilation.

It's hard to reconcile that view with Jesus' woe here, it seems to me. It's better that he never lived, suggests that his eternal destiny is terrifying and terrible.

[13 : 25] And that of course is what hell is, the absence of God, a place that none of us should ever countenance being part of. They're the destinies, not nothing, obliteration, annihilation, heaven, or hell.

And woe to the one who betrays the Son of Man. Human culpability, human responsibility is not diminished or abrogated by God's sovereign plan.

We can't excuse it and say God wants me to do an evil act because it will bring good out of it. Not at all. Not for Judas. Not for us.

Notice too that Jesus submits to this betrayal. Jesus, knowing that Judas had betrayed him, supernatural knowledge, could easily have evaded it.

He could have said to his 11 other disciples, Judas here is the one who's about to betray me. He's exchanged my life for 30 pieces of silver.

[14 : 39] What are you going to do about it? And we know that in other cases, and later on Peter is very quick to pull out a sword, we might imagine that Judas' life would end before Jesus.

Jesus could have evaded the betrayal. He doesn't name Judas. He submits to the evil act. He submits to death. At every point in this and the following sections, though tragically leading to the cross, Jesus is in charge and in control.

He's not a helpless victim. He submits to death for the glory of God the Father. Well, despite the warning, despite the woe, Judas says to Jesus, Surely not I, Rabbi.

Subtly different from what the other disciples have said. They said, Surely not I, Lord.

It may not be that they quite used it in the term of Lord as in to be worshipped, but it's a high statement of respect and honour. Judas uses a respectful term, but a lower one.

[16 : 03] Surely not I, Rabbi, teacher, that is. He sort of distances the possibility of Jesus being Lord to be worshipped in the way he addresses him.

And Jesus replies to him, You have said so. It's your word. So you say. It's a slightly cryptic response.

Jesus is not saying, Yes, you're the betrayer, as though he's giving him a title and a job. His response, though, you said it, it's your word, is indicting Judas.

That is, yes, you're the one who's betraying, not because I'm telling you or decreeing it to you. You have already decided. It's your word. You've said so, is what Jesus is saying.

Back to Judas. We know from the other Gospel accounts that the disciples were still confused and when Judas got up and left, we're not told when he left in Matthew, they were not quite sure what he was doing and the suggestion is that the words between Jesus and Judas may not have been heard by all.

[17 : 21] Now, if that is the case and I think there's a fair reason to argue that is the case, then what does it suggest about where Judas is?

Our view of the Lord's Supper is sadly a bit distorted by Leonardo da Vinci, great painter though he was, he wasn't particularly accurate historically and so we have medieval dress and Italian looking men sitting at a table that you and I might sit at, a long wooden table but that's not what it would have been like.

The disciples with Jesus would have been reclining at a table, a low table, that would have been shaped like a U, three sides of a square, a triclinium it's called.

I'm very glad I didn't live in those times because it certainly favoured people who are right handed. You would lean on your left hand or elbow and you would pick up and eat the food and pass the food with your right hand.

You sort of had your back to people but you'd turn your head and talk to the people around there but being in a U shape you could look across fairly easily to others. If Jesus to Judas is unheard by others then Judas might well have been immediately next to Jesus and if Jesus is the person of honour at this meal as is clear his disciples prepare it for him then Judas is at one of the two prime spots next to him.

[18 : 56] John we're told is at the other one in another gospel Peter has to ask John to ask Jesus something. Judas is given a place of high honour at this meal.

He's not relegated to the furthest position at the far end of the triclinium on the far side from Jesus. It's a place of honour. Literally he would have dipped his bread in the same bowl that Jesus used.

makes his betrayal all the more tragic in a way from his position of honour. Judas may well have left at this time after these words but what follows is still surprising.

They don't resume into a happy Passover meal. Jesus' words have already shocked them and now come words that shocked them again. While they're eating Jesus took a loaf of bread.

Don't think of a great big loaf from Baker's Delight it's unleavened bread so it's probably like a great big sort of biscuity type thing and after blessing it that is giving thanks to God.

[20 : 05] Blessed are you God of the universe for all the grain of the field has come from you etc. He broke it and gave it to the disciples. We don't know if Jesus actually got up from his place and walked around the inside of the ewe that's where the servants would serve the food from.

Whether Jesus actually walked around giving it or whether he just broke it and then passed it along both ways we don't know it doesn't matter. He said eat it but it's the words that follow that are shocking.

This is my body. Clearly he's speaking symbolically and his body is like yours and my body. This bread symbolises my body.

Literally he probably said it without even the word is because it wouldn't be said in Aramaic. This my body. It's a shocking thing to say. Jews like us would be horrified to think of eating somebody.

Cannibalism was abhorrent for them as it would be in our imaginations I'm sure. So Jesus' words are jarring the festival.

[21 : 16] It's not part of the Passover liturgy. It is to eat the bread but it's not to say this is my body. He's symbolising something. Broken, maybe suggestive of death as he passes it around.

It's a little bit unclear to this point but the words that follow explain it a little bit more. He then took a cup. In that meal, apart from the fact that you'd have a drink during the meal anyway, there were four particular cups.

It may be that there were four big goblets and each would sit from the same goblet or it's maybe a bit like a toast. When we toast somebody's achievement we all fill our glasses and somebody says some words and then we all drink together.

That may be what was going on four times. All four symbolised or remembered some aspect of the Passover events.

Scholars suggest that this is probably the third of four which had a particular focus on redemption, liberation from Egypt, slavery and so on.

[22 : 29] So, Jesus takes that third cup and either they all drink together or he passes it around. But it's his words again that shock. Drink from it all of you, fair enough.

But then he goes on to say, for this is my blood. Now we might sort of cope if he passed some bread and said this is my body.

But when we're past a cup and told this is my blood, I think the level of offensiveness for a Jew in particular would rise. Blood was strictly forbidden.

If you ate meat, the blood would be drained out of it. The Old Testament laws are very clear on that. Indeed, something that's reiterated in the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament as well.

This is my blood. Clearly, death is in mind. But more than that, particular death. Jesus says, this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

[23 : 43] The bread and the wine together are pointing to a death which disciples have been warned about for some time and is, they now know, imminent the next day.

When Israel came out from Egypt under Moses after the first Passover, they came to Mount Sinai in the wilderness. In some ways, that was the end of the actual exodus, the culmination of it.

Mount Sinai was the mountain of God and there they heard the voice of God give them the Ten Commandments after which God spoke more laws to Moses which he wrote down and relayed to the Israelites.

That all began in Exodus 19 when they get there. They are the covenant people of God, chosen people, God's own people. And at the end of that bracket of laws, there is a ceremony in Exodus 24.

An animal is killed, blood is poured out and the covenant between God and Israel is established. The words of Jesus here, this is my blood of the covenant, point back to that event.

[24 : 59] In fact, it's only one of two places in the whole of the Old Testament where the words blood and covenant come together. And this is it, what Jesus is alluding to most likely. What's he saying?

When Israel had come out from Egypt, having received all of God's laws, by performing that sacrifice, Israel was pledging to be the covenant people of God.

They were pledging to uphold God's laws and standards, to live as God wanted them to do. So the participation in that sacrificial ceremony in Exodus 24 was their agreement to belong to God.

We don't do that sort of thing particularly, but in a wedding, you get both couples signing paper. They're both pledging in a sense to belong together and uphold their marriage vows.

It's a covenant between two people. Well, in the Old Testament, covenants were made with blood and both parties in this case are agreeing to belong together.

[26 : 02] And in a sense, Israel is saying, if we fail your standards, O God, our destiny will be like this animal whose blood is now shed. So what's Jesus saying?

Clearly, he's talking about his own death as a sacrifice. He's talking about it as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins at the end of verse 28. But it's blood of covenant.

That is, it's between God and people. This is not just about an individual relating to God. It's about belonging to the community of God's people. And it's about them saying, we accept God's standards.

We accept the demands of God on our holiness and our lives. We pledge to live as God wants us to live. It's a high pledge, actually, as they participate and drink the blood of the covenant.

It's an offensive idea. It's deliberately shocking. It's not literally, of course, his blood. But it's saying we now belong to God in a new way.

[27 : 11] What Jeremiah calls a new covenant, where the laws of God are written on the heart. Putting those two ideas together, it's reminding us that Jesus' death is more powerful than an animal's death in the Old Testament.

That his blood not only brings forgiveness of sins, but actually changes our hearts on the inside. That's ultimately what Jesus' death does accomplish for us as well.

This new covenant between God and his people is sealed by the blood, not of an animal, but of Jesus Christ. And participating in this last supper, his disciples were pledging to belong to the covenant people, pledging to uphold the standards of God in their life.

Well, sadly, Christian history is plagued by disagreement over this meal and over Christian practice. In other Gospels and 1 Corinthians, Jesus says, do this in remembrance of me, words that are on this wooden plank behind me, above the table.

That is, this was not just a meal then with these disciples, but for Christians in all ages, something to be repeated in memory of Jesus. Looking back to his death as the great Passover, liberation not from slavery in Egypt, but from sin.

[28 : 36] Clearly, Jesus' words allude to his death and clearly his words about body and blood are symbolic words. They're not literally his body and blood. Though sadly, over the years, people have added so much into this and thought that somehow in the Lord's supper, which is our continuation in a sense of that meal, the bread and the wine magically and mystically become blood and body of Jesus.

But certainly it's looking back symbolically to his death. It's not a re-sacrifice. His death was once for all.

But it's more than just memory as well. It's more than just remembering something in the past. It's blood of the covenant. So as we, in obedience to Jesus' words then, still continue this institution of the Lord's Supper, as we call it, and take bread and wine and eat and drink.

We are therefore pledging to belong to the covenant people of God. In a sense, by eating and drinking, we're making a strong statement of our intent to live as God wants us to live.

To live faithfully obedient lives as the community of God's people. It's not about an individual making his or her communion with God. That's a private Victorian England idea, sadly, that's crept in.

[30 : 06] It's about the community of God's people together, belonging together, living as the people of God as God requires us to live. We're making a pledge to God.

A high pledge to live lives like Jesus. There's a sense in which the symbolism of eating and drinking has got the idea of our nourishment as well.

It's not just that we remember and it's not just that we make a pledge, but actually we come for this spiritual food to be strengthened and nourished, to receive again in a sense the benefits of Jesus' death for us, the forgiveness of sins, as he says here in verse 28.

But to be strengthened by God, to be his covenant people. But there's another dimension as well. Not only does it look back and look to our present pledge as the covenant people, but it looks forward.

Just as the Passover in Moses' day looked forward to the promised land. Jesus says in verse 29, I tell you I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.

[31 : 22] If this is the third of the four cups of the Passover, it suggests that Jesus didn't drink the last of the fourth cup. That the meal was left incomplete, so to speak, before they go out and cross over to the Mount of Olives.

Jesus is looking forward to eating and drinking in his heavenly kingdom with his covenant people. And so when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we're proclaiming Jesus' death until he comes.

We look forward to the messianic banquet of heaven. We lift our hearts as though somehow we're in a sense anticipating being in God's heavenly kingdom, the messianic banquet of Jesus the Messiah.

We're looking forward as well as backward as well as to the present. The disciples with Jesus, we're told in verse 30, leave.

When it says they've sung the hymn, it's probably not strictly singular and probably what they sing would include what's called the great Hallel, Psalms 113 to 118, where the Psalms normally sung at the Passover meal.

[32 : 32] And so we can imagine that Jesus and his disciples sing them at the end before they leave or even sing them as they walk down the Kidron Valley and up onto the slopes of the Mount of Olives.

And right near the end of those Psalms, they would have sung presumably these words. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing.

It is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. And then it finishes, O give thanks to the Lord for he is good.

For his steadfast love endures forever. Imagine singing those words as in effect you head out to die.

The meal began with the threat of betrayal in the verses preceding 14 to 16. And it ends with a note of desertion. Jesus said to them, verse 31, you will become deserters because of me this night.

[33 : 36] Because of me hanging on a cross, despised and rejected. You will desert me. The 11 of you that are left. And again, this is written. It doesn't exonerate or excuse their desertion.

But it's written. He quotes from Zechariah 13. I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered. Jesus, the good shepherd, struck to die.

And his sheep will scatter as they desert him. But as so often when the New Testament quotes the old, the context is carried over. And the context of that verse goes on to say that some will come back and be restored.

That is, the desertion and the striking is not the end. It's a word of hope. And so Jesus then says, but after I'm raised up, a word of hope, that death is not the end.

Resurrection is to come. And he'll go ahead of them to Galilee and they will join him there and they'll be restored back into fellowship with him as indeed happens after the resurrection. Notably for Peter who particularly denies that he will deny Jesus if you get the double denial.

[34 : 44] Before the cock crows, Jesus warns him, you'll deny me three times. By 1.30am in the morning, probably. Just a few hours, you'll have denied me three times.

And Peter says, even if I must die with you, I'll not deny you. We can admire his hope. But his words were not carried out.

At least initially. In conclusion, think who Jesus ate with that night. His 12 closest.

One betrays him and doesn't even complete the meal with him. Eleven will desert him. None will be left.

A meal with betrayer and deserters. We often think that somehow we have to be good enough to take bread and wine.

[35 : 46] And yes, it's true that there is strong warning in the first letter to Corinthians by Paul about not eating unworthily.

About getting ourselves right with God before we receive the bread and the wine. Words that we often hear in the service, the Anglican service. But in essence, it's a meal for sinners.

For other Anglican prayer book words remind us that we're not worthy. We come not trusting in our own righteousness, but in God's great and manifold mercy to us.

And the first, this last meal of Jesus, the last supper, speaks to us of that. None of them was worthy. Jesus knew that Judas would betray him and that the others would desert him.

He doesn't exclude them from table fellowship because of that. But at least for the eleven, they are restored by grace. And it's in that context that we eat.

[36 : 47] That we remember Jesus' death for us, poured out for the forgiveness of sins. We look forward to being part of his messianic banquet community in heaven. And for now, we pledge again that we will be God's covenant people.

And we ask in God, in a sense, to strengthen us as we receive bread and wine. To enable us to live the lives that we're meant to live. As the covenant community of God's people.

It's a meal of grace. For we're not accepted into God's covenant community and we don't continue in it, apart from the grace of God, demonstrated in the death of Jesus that we remember.

God's mercy to us, symbolised in this meal, is not cheap. It carries for us a high obligation of life and for God the high cost of his son's death.

His son's blood poured out for us. Jesus' death. Jesus' death. Maybe we will fail. Maybe there'll be times when we deny or desert Jesus.

[37 : 57] Heaven forbid that. But none of us can be sure in our own strength that we will not. Jesus anticipates, in the quote from Zechariah, the restoration of those who are scattered.

He demonstrated that later to Peter after the resurrection. And thankfully his grace and mercy extends to that. So that we receive the Lord's Supper having confessed our sins and asked for forgiveness, been assured of forgiveness and by claiming our own unworthiness.

But then we can eat with confidence, thankfulness, deep gratitude to the Lord Jesus for his death for us. So let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the obedience of your son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Obedience unto death for us.

Thank you for the Lord's Supper, the bread and the wine, by which we regularly remember his death, look forward to the Messianic banquet, where we pledge again to live lives as the community of your people, and where we're strengthened spiritually from this food, as you make us more like Jesus.

[39 : 17] Help us to eat and drink with thankful, confident, hopeful hearts. Amen.