

WHO'S AT THE TABLE? – INCLUSIVENESS IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

'For everyone born, a place at the table,
for everyone born, clean water and bread,
a shelter, a space, a safe place for growing,
for everyone born, a star overhead.'

Shirley Murray's hymn 'A place at the table'¹ might have been written with Luke's Gospel in mind, for Luke's household of faith is an inclusive one, with everyone welcome 'at the table'. Again and again Luke's Jesus reaches out to bring in those previously excluded: those of low status (a category which includes women as well as the poor), the sick and ritually unclean, sinners and outcasts. Luke emphasises more than the other Gospel-writers Jesus' association with those on the fringes of society.² But it is not just those at the margins of Jewish society that were included: there are signs within the Gospel (and even more, within Luke's second volume, the book of Acts) of a universalism that would genuinely accord 'everyone born' a place at the table.

From the early chapters of the Gospel, Luke includes the Gentiles amongst those to whom the good news is to be announced. Even while it is stressed that Mary and Joseph were doing what was customary under the law of Moses (2:22,27) there are indications that Jesus is not sent solely for the Jews alone. Simeon's prophetic words over the baby Jesus proclaim him not only 'glory to your people Israel' but also, and significantly, 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles' (2:32, NRSV). All three Synoptic Gospels use the quotation that begins at Isaiah 40:3 about a voice crying out in the wilderness to describe the ministry of John the Baptist, but only Luke continues the passage to its end 'and all flesh shall see the salvation of God' (Luke 3:6, contrast Matt 3:3, Mark 1:3).³ Luke's universalism also comes out in his description of people coming 'from east and west, from north and south' to eat in the kingdom of God' (13:29 – the parallel in Matthew only mentions east and west).⁴ The scene at Nazareth – the sermon preached by Jesus in the synagogue and its reception – functions as a programme statement for Luke-Acts as a whole, particularly since Luke chooses to place this incident right at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry instead of having the rejection at Nazareth occur much later (Luke 4:14-30, contrast Matt 13:54-58, Mark 6:1-6). Luke's Jesus makes a point of associating the Gentiles with the poor and lowly to whom the good news is to be proclaimed. He refers to the ministry of Elijah with the Gentile widow of Zarephath and to Elisha's healing of Naaman the Syrian, contrasting him with the many lepers in Israel at the time.⁵ 'When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage'. The folk at Nazareth do not tolerate 'a God who in the ministry of Jesus the prophet will go to social and religious outcasts as he did to a pagan widow and leper through his prophets, Elijah and

¹ Words, Shirley Murray, music Colin Gibson. *Faith Forever Singing: New Zealand Hymns and Songs for a New Day*. The New Zealand Hymnbook Trust. Raunati. 2000

² Michael Prior. *Jesus the Liberator: Nazareth Liberation Theology (Luke 4:16-30)*. Sheffield Academic Press. Sheffield. 1995., 50.

³ I Howard Marshall. *Luke Historian & Theologian*. Paternoster Press. Exeter. 1970., 140.

⁴ Philip F Esler. *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: the Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. 1987., 34.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 35 – which notes that after his healing and his acknowledgment of Yahweh Naaman remained a Gentile and the military commander of a Gentile king.

Elisha.’⁶ They reject both the message and the messenger. Sometimes the prospect of a place at the table for everyone can be threatening to those who have been used to using the space for themselves.

Luke’s widening of the boundaries beyond Israel also extends to the Samaritans, and he includes particular material about them, on occasions using a Samaritan as the hero of the story (the Good Samaritan parable 10:29-37, the Samaritan leper 17:11-19, and in Acts the conversion of the Samaritans by Philip and their reception of the Holy Spirit Acts 8).⁷ Significantly, he omits Jesus’ words to the Twelve as they set out on their first mission ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (Matt 10:5 – contrast Luke 9:1-6). For Luke, salvation, the good news, a seat at the table, are for people of all races and not just for a chosen few.

For woman and man, a place at the table,
revising the roles, deciding the share,
with wisdom and grace, dividing the power,
for woman and man, a system that’s fair.

For young and for old, a place at the table,
a voice to be heard, a part in the song,
the hand of a child in hands that are wrinkled,
for young and for old, a place to belong.

Many commentators have drawn attention to the heightened role of women in this Gospel, sometimes seen as a specific instance of Luke’s Jesus’ concern to include those of low status.⁸ With the issue of Luke’s treatment of women the subject of a separate paper, I will largely leave the question aside, except to note the possibility – indeed the likelihood in my view – that women disciples were present at the Last Supper among a larger group who shared the meal with Jesus. Quesnell argues that the reference to the apostles being at table with Jesus (22:39) does not imply that the apostles were the only ones who were present, noting that in Luke the construction ‘he did X and the apostles were with him’ never excludes the presence of others.⁹ A further argument for the presence of women is Jesus’ repeated description of the meal as a Passover: eating the Passover was normally done in a family grouping, with women and children carrying out part of the ritual. This raises the possibility that children were also present at the Last Supper. It should not surprise us if this had been the case in Luke, since children were amongst the most powerless in that society. Likewise Luke includes, more than the other Synoptic writers, the perspectives of the very old and the very young. Who can forget the aged Simeon and Anna acclaiming the infant Jesus as the long-awaited one (Luke 2), or the as-yet-unborn (and unnamed) John the Baptist recognising Jesus and leaping for joy

⁶ Robert J Karris. *Luke: Artist and Theologian: Luke’s Passion Account as Literature*. Paulist Press. New York. 1985., 33.

⁷ J Massyngbaerde Ford. ‘Reconciliation and Forgiveness in Luke’s Gospel’ in *Political Issues in Luke-Acts* ed Richard J Cassidy & Philip J Scharper. Orbis Books. Maryknoll, New York. 1983. 80-98., 88.

⁸ Thus, for example, David L Barr. *New Testament Story: an introduction*. 2nd Edition. Wadsworth Publishing. Belmont, CA. 1995. 326

⁹ Citing 8:1-2 as an example. Quesnell notes that Jesus intended to eat the Passover meal ‘with his disciples’ (a group in Luke that clearly includes women) (22:11) and that after the meal his disciples followed him to the Mount of Olives (22:39) and considers therefore that the disciples remained with Jesus throughout the meal. Quentin Quesnell. ‘The Women at Luke’s Supper’ in *Political Issues in Luke-Acts* ed Richard J Cassidy & Philip J Scharper. 59-79. 66, 71.

within Elizabeth's womb (1:44)? 'For young and for old, a place at the table ... a place to belong.'

'For just and unjust, a place at the table,
abuser, abused, with need to forgive,
in anger, in hurt, a mindset of mercy,
for just and unjust, a new way to live.'

The Jesus we encounter in Luke's Gospel is one who seeks to include not only those who had previously been excluded because of who they are – whose race or religion, gender or age had kept them on the outside – but those who were excluded because of what they had done. Jesus is presented consistently as one who reaches out to 'sinners' – to those who had transgressed the moral or the purity laws of Jewish society. Indeed one commentator has noted that, 'St Luke's Gospel is remarkable for the degree to which it emphasizes the reconciling and forgiving character of Jesus.'¹⁰ While the criticism that Jesus 'eats with tax collectors and sinners' is part of the tradition that Luke inherited, and Jesus' statement that 'I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance' (5:32) appears in all three Synoptic Gospels, Luke expands on this theme beyond its significance in the tradition.¹¹

The central section of the Gospel, especially chapters 5-19, contains repeated encounters between Jesus and 'sinners', as he reaches out to them and they become in turn a source of conflict that shows how Jesus' approach differs from that of the Jewish insiders, and in particular the Pharisees. This section is framed by two key scenes in which Jesus includes a sinner amongst his followers and declares his purpose: the call of Levi (5:27-32) 'I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance' and the conversion of Zaccheus (19:1-10) 'For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost'.¹² Framed by these two encounters, Jesus' public ministry demonstrates over and over his desire to include sinners amongst his friends. The scene with Levi sets out the themes of forgiveness and inclusion for sinners, and conflict with those who would exclude them, that dominate this part of the Gospel. After Zaccheus, Jesus finally enters Jerusalem and the lead-up to the Passion Narrative begins.

Luke's attitude to 'tax collectors' (actually, 'toll collectors', sub-contractors who collected tolls rather than those who collected the Roman poll tax¹³) is significant. In that society these people were ostracised, classed with thieves, extortioners and murderers, and regarded as a source of uncleanness. Luke includes more – and more elaborate – material on toll collectors than Matthew and Mark – including the special advice given to them by John the Baptist (ie be honest – rather than giving up the occupation entirely 3:10-11). The way Luke tells the story, Levi did not simply rise and follow Jesus (as in Matt 9:9, Mark 2:14) but 'he got up, left everything, and followed him' (5:27). Again, in contrast to the other Synoptics, Luke has Levi give 'a great banquet' for Jesus: thus the drama of this call story – where the call itself is somewhat miraculous – is heightened to show the impact of Jesus' relationship with 'tax collectors and sinners'. For Luke, toll collectors function as archetypal 'sinners' who would normally be expected to be beyond the possibility of salvation – and yet Jesus welcomes

¹⁰ Ford, *op.cit.*, 80.

¹¹ Dennis E Smith. 'Table Fellowship as a Literary Motif in the Gospel of Luke' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106/4 (1987) 613-638., 636.

¹² See David A Neale. *None But the Sinners: Religious Categories in the Gospel of Luke*. Sheffield Academic Press. Sheffield. 1991. 100-01.

¹³ Thus Neale, *op.cit.*, 111n1; similarly Ford, *op.cit.* 83.

them.¹⁴ Significantly in Luke the parable of the Lost Sheep (15:1-7) is told in favour of ‘tax collectors and sinners’ who were coming near to listen to him, and against the Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling about this. Luke alone includes the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (18:9-14), where the latter acknowledges his sinfulness and is commended. The encounter with Zaccheus, ‘a chief tax collector’ and thus in that world a chief sinner, is found only in Luke (19:1-10). Luke tells us moreover that all who saw Jesus’ meeting with Zaccheus ‘began to grumble and said “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner”’ – thus reinforcing the way Jesus, and here Jesus alone, was receptive towards sinners and outcasts. Luke relates this incident here to make a clear point: as one commentator has noted ‘Jesus’ visit in Zaccheus’ house was not a delay or a detour on his journey to Jerusalem; this was and is the very purpose of the journey. “The Son of man came to seek and to save the lost.”’¹⁵

Even as his journey to Jerusalem draws to its climax at the cross, Jesus is still reaching out towards sinners and welcoming them. Luke alone has Jesus pray forgiveness for those who crucified him (23:34). And in Luke alone does Jesus proclaim salvation for the repentant criminal on the adjacent cross: almost his dying words are a radical statement of inclusion “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise”. (23:43)¹⁶

Jesus’ words to the dying criminal, with their hint of the banquet of salvation which will be shared in Paradise, point to the most important aspect of Jesus’ inclusion of sinners: he not only welcomed them, but he ate and drank with them. Indeed this was one of the charges levied at Jesus: that he was ‘a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners’ (Luke 7:34). Indeed Karris has commented that ‘in Luke’s Gospel Jesus got himself crucified by the way he ate.’¹⁷

Luke uses the image of table-fellowship to demonstrate the inclusive nature of Jesus’ ministry, the way he ate with sinners, outcasts, those on the margins of his society. Many commentators have noted that Luke has a much larger number of meal scenes (in narrative sections as well as in parables) than the other Synoptic writers.¹⁸ In this Gospel ‘Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal.’¹⁹ Coming from a society in which many meals are eaten alone, or (even in a group) in front of the television, it can require a conscious effort to understand the significance of Jesus’ table-fellowship in the Lucan world. Neyrey has used a variety of social-science perspectives to demonstrate how meals ‘tell us about patterns of social relations, about social ranking, about group solidarity, and about economic transactions.’²⁰ The table functioned as a way to designate a special relationship between the participants at the meal, and indeed the communal meal was frequently, in both the Jewish and the Graeco-Roman worlds, the central social activity that showed group identity and solidarity.²¹

¹⁴ See Neale, *ibid.*, 113-115

¹⁵ Fred B Craddock. *Luke*. Interpretation A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. John Knox Press. Louisville. 1990.,220.

¹⁶ Karris, *op. cit.* 121, notes that this verse has been described as “The Gospel within the Gospel” for the way in which it sums up Lucan soteriology, as ‘with-ness, not separation’.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 47, 70,

¹⁸ See, for example, Halvor Moxnes. *The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke’s Gospel*. Fortress Press. Philadelphia. 1988. 87. Similarly, Smith ‘Table Fellowship’ 616.

¹⁹ Karris, *op.cit.*, 47, quoting another (unnamed) commentator .

²⁰ ‘Ceremonies in Luke-Acts: the Case of Meals and Table Fellowship’ in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*. Ed Jerome H Neyrey. Hendrikson Publishers. Peabody, Mass. 1991. 360-87., 362.

²¹ Smith, *op. cit.* 633.

Meals show who is included as part of the group, and who is excluded. Who is at the table and what goes on there can be profound, if unspoken, demonstrations of corporate identity and belonging. One of the best meals I can remember came when I was working as a prison chaplain in Mt Eden. A staff member was leaving, and as well as the staff farewell function he contributed a large sponge cake and two bottles of (usually forbidden) coke to each of the prison wings. I happened to be inside B wing when it arrived, and was deeply touched when without thinking the women cut me a slice of the precious cake and poured me a mug of the coke. They were treating me as part of their community and I will never forget it.

In the East, even today, to invite a man to a meal was an honor. It was an offer of peace, trust, brotherhood, and forgiveness; in short, sharing a table meant sharing life. In Judaism in particular, table-fellowship means fellowship before God, for the eating of a piece of broken bread by everyone who shares in a meal brings out the fact that they all have a share in the blessing which the master of the house had spoken over the unbroken bread.²²

Jesus' table-fellowship was an 'acted parable': by eating and drinking with outcasts and sinners, with women, and with those who would not normally have shared a table together (scribe, tax collector, fisherman and Zealot) he says that God shares life with them and they are to share life with one another.²³ This was no casual disregard of the social customs of his day, notes Neyrey, but a formal strategy. 'Although likes should eat with likes, by eating with sinners and foreigners Jesus formally signals that God extends an inclusive invitation to non-observant and sinful outsiders for covenant membership and for status as forgiven persons.'²⁴ The meals that Jesus ate in Luke's Gospel bridge distinctions between people and include those from all walks of life in a common grouping, gathering people in from the outside.²⁵

Food is necessary to sustain life – something all too familiar to those, like the people in Luke's villages, for whom freedom from hunger is not automatic. The sharing of food in the form of hospitality is important in Luke: if all have a place at the table, then all can be fed and the life of all can be sustained. The meals in this Gospel have significant theological meaning. As well as the 'great banquet' hosted by Levi for Jesus, and the dinner at the house of Zaccheus there is the meal where the sinful woman enters and anoints Jesus' feet (7:36-49), the feeding of the five thousand men (9:10-17), the meal at which Martha serves at table while Mary listens to the teaching (10:38-42), the dinner at the Pharisee's house where Jesus denounces Pharisees and lawyers (11:37-54), another Pharisee-hosted meal where Jesus talks about seats at a banquet and the parable of the Great Dinner (14:1-24), the Last Supper / Passover meal (22:4-38) and the meal at Emmaus (24:29-43).²⁶ Jesus is certainly inclusive, dining on various occasions with Pharisees, tax collectors and sinners, his friends and followers, and a huge crowd! In each of these the meal both features as narrative setting and reveals important

²² Joachim Jeremias. *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus*. Scribner's. New York. 1971. 115-16, cited Karris. *op. cit.* 58..

²³ Karris, *ibid.* 58; Also Norman Perrin. *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*. SCM Press. London. 1967. 107.

²⁴ Neyrey, *op.cit.* 378.

²⁵ Moxnes, *op.cit.* 88. Also Bang Cong Tran. *Table Fellowship in Luke's Gospel: An Author-Text-Reader-Centred Approach*. Theological Research Exchange network: Theses & Dissertations 2001, 66.

²⁶ See Ford, *op. cit.*, 87. There are, in addition, parables in which a meal features as the climax, such as the Lost Sheep and Prodigal Son/Loving Father stories. Smith, *op.cit.* 637 notes how the prodigal son serves as a paradigm for the outcast whose redeemed state is illustrated by the great feast which the father gives on his return.

aspects of Lucan theology. Luke frequently makes use of the symposium motif of ‘table talk’ common in ancient literature, whereby Jesus teaches while at a meal. Thus Luke 14 begins with Jesus being invited to eat a Sabbath meal in the house of a Pharisee, and continues with a collection of things said at table, including the parables of the places at table (14:7-11), of banquet invitations (14:12-14) and the parable of the Great Dinner (14:15-24). Each of these presents a different teaching, yet all are tied together by the symbolism of the banquet and by the context of an actual meal.²⁷

And there is an additional dynamic which operates in the Lucan meal scenes: the meal functions as a metaphor for the banquet in the kingdom of God.²⁸ The theme of the messianic banquet was part of the tradition Luke inherited, and was understood by many of his readers, familiar with Isaiah’s picture of the joyful feast ‘On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines stained clear.’ (Isa 25:6) One of the customs that characterised the lifestyle of the Pharisees was a prohibition against eating with outsiders.²⁹ Jesus’ table-fellowship, particularly with ‘tax collectors and sinners’, was thus a powerful statement of God’s welcome to them, a proclamation that all would be together around the table in the eschatological banquet at the end of time. For the Pharisees, the purity laws, regulations for the observance of the Sabbath and rules for table fellowship all functioned to strengthen and safeguard group identity. Luke’s Jesus has a new interpretation of the law of purity – that purity means inclusiveness in table-fellowship.³⁰

This is emphasised in Jesus’ parabolic saying about banquet invitations (14:12-14): don’t invite the people you know, the people close to you, the people who can invite you back; instead, invite those who can’t repay you with their own hospitality: the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. These were people on the borders of or outside the village community. By Jewish law they were considered unclean. To invite needy and unclean persons to a dinner meant ‘to include them in a table fellowship originally reserved for people who followed the same rules of purity.’³¹

Jesus makes it clear that what he is suggesting people do with their own dinner invitations is precisely what God is doing through him, and will do at the Eschatological Banquet (Luke 14:15-24). God (in the person of the master of the dinner) will welcome the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind – the very ones forbidden access to meals and to worship in the Temple³² in Jewish society. God is an inclusive God – the community of God’s people should likewise be that inclusive: ‘for everyone born, a place at the table’.

We can see the process begun by Jesus continued by the early Church in Luke’s second volume. In particular, the key episode of Peter’s vision (where all foods were declared clean) and his visit to the house of Cornelius when the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out ‘even on the Gentiles’ (Acts 10) shows divine sanction for such inclusiveness, just as Peter’s having to justify his actions to the Church at Jerusalem (Acts 11) demonstrates some reluctance on the

²⁷ See Smith, *op. cit.*, 614, 621.

²⁸ Moxnes, *op.cit.*, 87, 127.

²⁹ Esler. *Community and Gospel* 75. Esler notes that the community of the Essenes at Qumran also had the same probation against sharing meals with outsiders.

³⁰ See Moxnes, *op. cit.* 102 on the way purity laws and table-fellowship worked to demarcate members of the group from outsiders; Tran, *op.cit.*, 67 on purity as inclusiveness and the difficulties this meant for Jews.

³¹ Moxnes. *ibid.* 132

³² See Leviticus 21:16-20. Neyrey, *op.cit.* 379

part of Jewish Christians to accept such unrestricted table-fellowship. The question of who might have a place at the table obviously remained a live issue for some time.

Is it still so with us? Jesus' followers are to continue his work: the ministry of the Church is to gather people together around a common table and feed them. The world Luke's Jesus is designing is one in which there are no longer insiders and outsiders, a world in which all are welcome. What does this say about who can be part of our fellowships? About who might come to our communion tables and share bread and wine with us? What is this asking about our relationships with those whom our society sees as outcasts and pushes out to the margins? How pleased would we really be to be described as 'a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of [outcasts] and sinners'? The inclusiveness of Luke's Jesus challenges us. Sharing a meal is an intimate act. It means sharing a relationship of a special kind. And Luke invites us to open up our tables and our hearts to all comers. What might Christian community look like if we did that?

For everyone born, a place at the table,
to live without fear, and simply to be,
to work, to speak out, to witness and worship,
for everyone born, the right to be free.

and God will delight when we are creators
of justice and joy, compassion and peace:
yes God will delight when we are creators
of justice, justice and joy!

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