Praxis South – 18th May 2017
'The Eucharist: a meal with friends'

1. Intro:

Within the Christian Church, one central feature of worship and liturgy is the celebration of the Eucharist. Whether we are the presider, assisting in the 'diaconal' role, or celebrating as a participant, much of our theology is shaped by this communal event. Today I will argue that the Eucharist, at its heart, it is a **meal with friends**. Celebration of this meal characterised the early Xian community & it **developed from** a communal meal.
By the twenty-first century, in the UK, it may have become stylised & symbolic; it may be memorable for its dignity and reverence, but its roots are still in the Christian community eating together. It is a **social** as much as **theological** and **liturgical** occasion.

If we recall one early church text: **Acts 2.42–47**
41 So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. 42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the **breaking of bread** and the prayers. 43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 44 All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they **broke bread at home** and **ate their food** with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

This reminds us that alongside the worship, social justice and evangelism of that early community, there was a commitment to shared eating. To giving thanks for God's provision, and to some form of symbolically significant 'breaking of bread'.
Now, whether this Jerusalem community was being held up as an **ideal state** of Xian community (i.e. not **every** Xian follower in Jerusalem participated in this) or if it was an aspirational model, or if it was an actual 'flagship community', is not clear. What is evident however, is that the Eucharist was a central plank of their faith and a **defining characteristic**.
Pliny the Younger – Roman Governor of what is now Turkey, writes to Emperor Trajan in 112 CE, seeking advice on how to deal with this Christian sect, who have troubling superstitious beliefs - **atheism, cannibalism & incest**.

- **atheism** - refusal to worship the emperor as a god
- **cannibalism** - Eucharistic feast - partaking of the body & blood of Christ
- **incest** - they referred to each other as 'brother & sister' even when married

What they actually did at this **'breaking of bread'** feast is debated, but it now seems likely that there were two strands within the Eucharistic tradition. A shared celebratory feast (what we know as an *agape*) **and** also a memorial meal linked to Christ's death, styled after St Paul's tradition, and countering the 'passover meal' tradition of the Jewish believers. We do know that there was immense variety in how the early church operated, and that significant local differences were ubiquitous.

Eating together:

Of particular interest to us today, is the **significance** of sharing food together – a meal is a place where powerful social & personal bonds can be forged. In the early Church's middle-Eastern culture (as in ours) sitting at table together implied **acceptance** and **welcome** of a person. To an extent we align ourselves with those we share food with.

Before we embark on a more detailed exploration of the Eucharist, we must remember that Jesus' 'Last Supper' is set in the context of a **series** of meals with his disciples. In fact it was not the last supper at all, there were other post-resurrection feasts.

Throughout J's ministry, eating together was a place of encounter, it made a social statement – sometimes of restoration, occasional of conflict. Two examples from Luke's gospel; firstly, the

Zacchaeus story, where J deliberate identifies with this marginalised and unpopular man by quite brazenly inviting himself round for dinner (Luke 19.1-10). Secondly, J's equally brazen behaviour at Simon the Pharisee's home, where he endures Simon's shaming, social snubs at the dinner table. Jesus magnificently trumps these by welcoming the culturally shameful behaviour of the woman who anoints his feet during the feast (Luke 7.36-50).

Of course, in our 21st Century, Western cultural setting, inviting friends round for dinner is still a social marker point. It identifies a particular place in a developing friendship. It has embedded social codes – do you bring a bottle of wine and / or chocolates and / or flowers? What are the boundaries of the hospitality? Do you take you shoes off, are you free to get up and raid the fridge? All meals have **social codes** embedded in them.

Significance

So, what does this Eucharistic meal mean? It is a surprisingly difficult question to answer: it has an official answer – something that centres around 'the memorial of Christ's death'.
But it will have at least two other dimensions - your own personal understanding (with all the import that has for your faith journey), and the community understanding of what is going on as that meal is shared **in that place.** As with all liturgical events, 'social codes' apply here too.

By way of clarifying what I mean; firstly an example from William Cavanaugh's writing on the Eucharist in the Chilean church. During Pinochet's persecution of the Roman Catholic church throughout the 1970's and 80's, where there was widespread state-sponsored torture and disappearance; the Eucharist took on a deeper significance of hope in the face of despair. Cavanaugh states that it became the Church's **response to torture** within, an overt liturgy of torture and sacrifice. Under violent oppression, in which victim's bodies were regularly 'disappeared', the Eucharistic 're-membering' of Christ's body (by bringing it into the present - so that this past event became a living reality carrying an eschatological focus), became an event that **reclaimed hope**. The significance of this for those Chilean communities, is something that we can perhaps understand, but cannot appreciate in the same way that they did. Hence the Eucharist took on a particular significance for that community in that time.

A second example comes from closer to home. The work of Ann Primavesi and Jennifer Henderson brings observations from a Northern Irish context, from around the same time as Cavanaugh's thoughts in Chile. Noting the extreme sectarian division of that worldview, they pick up on the **exclusive nature** of the Eucharist. It is presided over by a priest and offered to the 'acceptable', which they see as a formalising of discriminatory structures that (quote) 'institutionalise the injustice of withholding true bread for life from those not recognised as worthy'.

Primavesi & Henderson see this as a betrayal of Jesus' whole ethos of seeking to eliminate the barriers (in teaching and action) between 'worthy' and 'unworthy'. In the many meals that Jesus shared, and described in parables, they argue, he circumvented the social norms and deliberately opened up the hierarchical seating arrangements to **include the outcast and marginalised**. Most evidently, this is seen in the parable of the Great Feast, where every available person is called in to make up the numbers at the table: all who are needy are welcomed. Rightly, they encourage us to look at ourselves – the most unlikely of guests - since God has no favourites, all are welcome to his table.

Why 'a meal with friends'?

But what of our setting and context? Well, we now come to think about the Eucharist from this vantage point. Perhaps we can see it as a social significant event, as well as being the ritualised and liturgically rich, ecclesial event that we are so familiar with. So, what might this meal mean for us: what significance might it carry, if we were to begin from a place where it was primarily a meal with friends?

To do this, we need to spend a few minutes thinking about the nature of friendship, and why this might matter before returning to consider friendship's implications, and the importance of this meal that Jesus hosts, just as he hosted the original 'last Supper' in that upper room.

Friends of Christ

Are we the 'Friends of Christ'? If I mention 'the Church', what image, picture or description comes to mind? …the 'body of Christ', the 'people of God', the 'sheep of his pasture'…? Maybe in there somewhere is and image of 'the vine' from John 15? But here is an often overlooked section later in that chapter;

John 15.12-17

> 12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16 You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. 17 I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

This is a clear description used by Jesus here of how he understands discipleship. His disciples are described as his **friends**. They are to follow a clear command – to love one another. This brings them into a special place - contrasted with their previous status as servants. Their relationship with their master is very different – no equality, no reciprocity, no mutuality, no privileged insight. Friends on the other hand have equality and access – they enjoy a mutual relationship. Well, this might be mildly interesting, but does it matter? I think it matter hugely, for it offers us a transformative self-image - as the friends of Christ.

Let's think about this **description** (not metaphor or picture), in some more detail. When Jesus spoke of friendship, was it the same thing that we understand as friendship? Well, yes and no. Friendship in 1st C Palestine would have been understood through two cultural 'lenses':
(i) the lens of the Hebraic people with their roots in a nomadic, tribal lifestyle that highlighted the importance of 'kin' and 'fictive kin', and (ii) the lens of the Greco-Roman world in which the place of friendship as a 'social good', the glue that binds society together, and enables one to 'live the best possible life'. Both of these were currents in the world of the early disciples.

In more detail then: firstly, the friendship world of 1st century Palestine Jews, is embedded in an 'agonistic' culture – a dualistic, competitive world where there is a **binary** understanding of society and one's place in it. One's identity comes from relationships with others – 'kin' (family) and wider society. Here the polar opposites of 'good' and 'bad' relate to 'honour' and 'shame' as the primary social values. Family honour is the prime good, and shaming the family is prime evil – the thing to be avoided at all costs.

In this world, **friends** come under the purview of family – they are '**fictive kin',** so to be a friend is a serious thing – it brings all the benefits and responsibilities of preserving your friend's family honour. Perhaps the closest we can come to a contemporary comparison is in 'The Godfather' with Sicilian Mafioso families!

Secondly, when the disciples heard 'you are my friends', they would also relate this to a Greco-Roman understanding of friendship. This places friendship as a prime social good, necessary for 'living the best possible life' – what we might call 'human flourishing'. Friendship helps the city-state to operate, by enabling life in which **the virtues can be exemplified**.

Greek virtues:

1. **Practical wisdom** or 'common sense' – the capacity to make the right decisions
2. **Moderation** (self-control) – to live a balanced life, free from excess

3. **Courage** – to hold one's nerve in the face of pressure and to stick to a path that one has committed to. Warfare allows opportunity to do this
4. **Justice** – to maintain the *polis*, to behave in a way that is honourable and preserves that which is socially right. To behave honourably

Amongst the classical writers, Aristotle is perhaps the most helpful in describing friendship's important and nuanced nature.

At a basic level, your friend is someone who likes you! A friend provides the affirmation that you are a 'likeable' person. At a deeper level, a friend is someone who seeks the good of their friend; they want them to flourish and live well. They encourage their friend to excel in that which makes for a fulfilled life, and in the ancient world this would mean pursuing a virtuous life.

Friendship is robust and enduring, it includes the affirmation and delight found in the company of the friend, but also has room for challenge and rebuke. Friendship is **robust** – we can say things **to** a friends that no one else can say. We can hear things **from** a friend that we would not allow anyone else to say to us.

But it is not all idealised: pragmatically, Aristotle outlines three types of friendship in *The Nicomachean Ethics*:

- **Friendships of utility** are based on friends who share common connections and circumstances, often through a common workplace. They are bound together by circumstance, and are **useful** to each other. The skills and character of the friends are beneficial to each other and there is a common understanding of this benefit. These friends can help us out in times of need – it's always good to have a plumber as a friend!

- **Friendships of pleasure** are based on a mutual enjoyment of each other in some shared activity. These are friends one might have a great time with, through some shared experience. These are people who are fun to be around and who bring us happiness, but we may not share our deepest feelings with them. In the ancient world, this category covered shared sexual pleasure, which featured significantly in Aristotle's social context.

  Of these first two categories, Aristotle says 'Such friendships, then, are easily dissolved, if the parties do not remain like themselves: for if the one party is no longer pleasant or useful the other ceases to love him' (Aristotle 2009: VIII.3.19-20).

- The third category he identifies is 'perfect' or **virtuous friendship** which is rooted in the **nature** of the friends themselves. Such friends love 'the good' in each other. This friendship is not entirely dependent on external factors, such as shared interests or mutually shared pleasures which, when they have passed, leave the friends with little connection. This friendship (being rooted in the lasting virtue of pursuing 'the good') is morally superior and mutually beneficial. Such friends are as 'another self' to each other; each mirroring who they are to the other, so that something of their own goodness is visible in their friend. Aristotle tells us that each is of such value as to live on in the other's heart, were one friend to die.

  This kind of friendship requires **commitment**, and it may involve physical or monetary assistance if required. There must be **reciprocity** – friendship cannot be one-sided. Similarly there needs to be **mutuality** – friends need to give and receive love – this is not a business arrangement. Friendship was truly necessary for *eudaimonia* – 'happiness' or 'living the best possible life'.

  For the ancient Greeks, *philos* is the most powerful of all the loves - more valued than the love of a wife (*eros*) because it confirms one's capacity for virtue.

So we are beginning to see something of the importance of friendship in the Classical world – the world that had significant influence on relationships in the Greco-Roman world of the New Testament.

The Eucharist – a meal with Friends

So, eventually, we return to think about this meal with friends – a meal to which Jesus has invited some of his closest friends. As we do so, hopefully the connections are being made with this liturgical event that is at the heart of Anglican worship. It is embedded in relationship before it is embellished with theology.

Let us return to that evening some 2000 years ago. Jesus has pre-booked the room, and gives directions to his followers as to how to get there. It may have been a Passover meal, but John's account does not quite fit with this timescale. At any rate, the meal is a place of welcome and feasting, **at which** bread and wine are given particular significance. Those who are present are not the highly committed, theologically sorted, fully signed-up disciples that we might have expected. In a few minutes, one will leave, go to the temple authorities, and betray his friend. A few will draw their swords, spoiling for a fight with the arresting guards. Later still, faced with a choice to display loyalty, one will deny all knowledge of his friend. And they all will flee into the night….

Thomas was there, Peter was there, Judas was there. This was not a meal of celebration for the orthodox, or those above reproach: it was a meal with friends – welcomed by their host with all their strengths and failings. A group of friends enjoying each other's company.

We, quite correctly, have moved a long way from that Jerusalem evening. Temporally, geographically, sociologically, theologically, liturgically we are nowhere near that gathering of friends on that chaotic and tragic night.

And yet! This meal is at the heart of what we do as Church; it energises who we are, and connects us in a profound way to the one who initiated our faith –forging our sect out of Judaism with the hammer of God's love.

But for all that we have gained, for all that we have added, what might we have lost from this Eucharist? I suggest that it might be a self-understanding that in turn can fuel both our ecclesial community and our missional activity. How so?

Hospitality and a shared meal

By way of conclusion. In the Eucharist there are of course; liturgical, symbolic, sacramental and theological dimensions, but these are built on an actual meal – a shared meal with friends. Our praxis should **enhance** not erase this dimension.
So, what might we learn? At least four things:

1. This was **one of many** meals that J shared with his friends, followers and opponents:
    - Feeding of crowds (4,000 or 5000)
    - Simon the Pharisee's house (where feet anointed)
    - Zacchaeus (shunned by community)
    - Mary, Martha & Lazarus
    - Emmaus encounter – moment of revelation at table after intimate conversation
    - BBQ fish by seashore – surprise feast

    It was an event in keeping with how they already lived as disciples - they were socially connected to each other.

2. The meal began with, and developed, human relationality as much as theological awareness.

3. Access was not restricted to this meal - all were present (Judas, Peter & Thomas). It models hospitality, an openness to 'the other' without requiring something of them. None of us **deserve** to be there in one sense, but all of us are **absolutely welcome.**

4. Transformation happens during it.

   In some traditions we will speak of this in terms of the **elements** – this will include a range of understandings: 'real presence' or 'transubstantiation'. In others this transformation will be in terms of the **significance** of bread & wine that is transformed (transignification). In others it will be the **memory** of X that 'transforms the hearts' of those who share in it.

What then are the implications for Church Community and Mission?

The technicalities of what happens during the Eucharist have occupied (and continue to occupy) theologians' energies. But I am suggesting that there is another vitally important aspect to this transformative meal. Gathering as 'the Friends of Christ' brings a rich theology of encounter with each other as the guests at Christ's table. What might be some implications for Church Community and Mission if we began to think of ourselves more in terms of friendship?

In other words: if we were committed to a self-understanding of ourselves as the 'friends of Christ', and if we viewed the Eucharist as an opportunity to share in God's hospitality that naturally spilled out to welcome all, what effect might this have for our ecclesiology and mission?

The key word is 'hospitality' – hospitality can be the precursor of friendship. To be hospitable to a stranger: in other words, to treat them as a friend **before they are a friend**, opens up the door to getting to know them at a human level. It begins with building relationship. In the ecclesial context, we are talking about a situation where those who come attend Church in the UK are around (at best) 8% of the population. We **are** a beleaguered minority!

We are a 'specialist interest' group, well outside the knowledge of the majority of the general population! How do we relate to each other and support each other against this background?

It's impossible to say, because practice differs so much, but I suspect that Churchgoing has become, for many of us, an 'attendance event' – we locate the practice of our faith in the attendance at a weekly (at best) worship event, designed to be doctrinally and liturgically orthodox. The prime identifier for us may not be with the worshipping community but with the worship event itself. But an event **on its own** cannot sustain us – it may provide opportunity, or trigger awareness of relationship with God. It may connect us with God's transcendence or immanence, but the interaction with fellow-travellers is better served in conversation, in the sharing of experience, in the connecting with those who share our faith values at a most human level.

Now let's shift over to how we might sustain this worshipping community. What for many of us would constitute 'evangelism'? It am willing to bet that for most of us, it will be inviting someone to Church. Why? This is an event that is specifically designed as an act of worship – it's for the believer. It's for those who want to build up their knowledge and awareness of the God they believe in. Why would we expect this to mesh with the interests of someone outside the faith?

Perhaps the unspoken reason is that we are bringing them to a professional – a minister, a vicar, a priest: someone who can explain on our behalf why faith matters. If we are from that kind of church that offers it, we might invite them to attend a 'seekers course' – slot then into a **programmed** introduction to Christian faith. Isn't that slightly odd, for something that matters so much to us?

Let's step back again. Most of us, I guess, would be happy to acknowledge that our Christian faith is **more** than assent to a set of intellectual propositions about belief in a Trinitarian God. Most of us value the relational element in Christian faith – that God can be **experienced**; subjectively and objectively.

In the world and in each other: in our 'minds' and our 'hearts'. In fact, the Trinitarian God that we worship is described in relational not structural terms – we don't speak of triangles or matrices, but of Father, of Son and of the animating breath of God.

Why then, given this foundation, are we drawn towards a programme driven, doctrinally biased method of faith sharing? Our friends are the ones who care about us – because they love us. What matters to us, matters to them. By virtue of them being our friends, we have earned the right to talk to them about what we value, what energises us, what fulfils our deepest longings, what makes sense of our world. They will share our interests in the same way that we will support theirs. Even though we might not be enthused by it, we will go with them to their Camera Club, go for a cycle ride, listen to them enthuse about their stamp-collection and so on! Friends are interested in all aspects of each other's lives.

So my concluding plea is to revisit the statement Jesus made – to his own description of his disciples. 'You are my friends'. I don't think this was a mistake or a throwaway line in the gospel. St John presents us with beautiful portrait of ourselves, but often it is one we don't recognise.

As friends of Christ, we have privileged access to the mind of God – we are drawn into a reciprocal and responsible relationship where mutuality is the key component.

As friends of Christ we are drawn in to a relationship that is open, not exclusive. We are invited into a network of relationships with others who also know Christ as friend. We embrace their diversity, their difference from us: that which makes them who they are. As with those who are our friends, we want them to become more fully who **they are**, not become more like us.

As friends of Christ, we recognise that this relationship is not exclusive, but endlessly makes room for others to join.

Finally, as friends of Christ, we gather to share a meal – unity is not engendered or sustained by us, but is the expression of God's animating Spirit – the bond of love between us. Kneeling next someone, with whom we may have nothing in common other than a commitment to be friends of Christ, reminds us of the necessity to be hospitable, as God has been to us.