

# Breaking Bread Together and Prayer



Luca Giordano, *The Communion of the Apostles*, c1705

## Key verse:

*They devoted themselves... to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (Part of verse 42)*

We can understand the reference to 'breaking of bread' in several ways. There was a Jewish custom of pronouncing the blessing and breaking and distribution of bread at the commencement of a meal. There were also daily fellowship meals which developed into the Agape or love feast, a custom developed in the early church as a time of fellowship, and where the Eucharist was often a part (until around 250 AD, when they became separate celebrations.)

Writing in 1815, the author Jonathan Crowther describes the function of the Agape meal as, 'seeking to strengthen the

bonds and the spirit of harmony, goodwill, and congeniality, as well as to forgive past disputes and instead love one another.'

Luke would know that the celebration of the Lord's Supper and fellowship meals were part of the life of the early churches, so his specific mention of breaking bread may signify the Lord's Supper, particularly as in verse 42 three other features – teaching, fellowship, and prayer – may also be spiritual activities.

### Group discussion:

Q) Is the Agape, or fellowship meal, something that could be a beneficial part of your own fellowship, and what form could it take?

# Breaking Bread Together

*Read Mark 14:22-26, 1 Corinthians 10:15-17*

While the disciples were together with Jesus for this Passover meal, Jesus takes the unleavened bread, breaks it, and gives it to his disciples with the words, 'This is my body.' The significance of Jesus's action was both in the breaking (his body broken on the Cross) and the distribution of the bread, symbolising the promise of his abiding presence, to be remembered as this act became an essential component of their fellowship in the developing church.

Jesus shares the third cup of the Passover meal, giving thanks (the verb is 'eucharisteo' from which comes our word 'Eucharist'). The cup symbolises the sacrificial offering of his life, and his use of the word 'covenant' emphasises the relationship between God

and all who acknowledge that sacrifice in their hearts and lives. This, says Jesus, is the last Passover meal he will share with them until the kingdom of God is revealed in all its glory.

Paul has been chastising believers for participating in pagan temple festivals, which he considers a dangerous practice, and points them to the spiritual reasons for sharing the bread and wine of the Last Supper. This participation in drinking from the cup and eating the bread shows a continuation of the desire of Jesus, that his disciples would remember his sacrificial offering in this symbolic meal.

## Group discussion:

Q) Denominations use a variety of liturgies for the Eucharist, but what does the celebration mean to you as an individual?

Q) Can any meal become a part of our faith experience?

Q) Should a celebration of the Eucharist be a more regular part of our worship?

# The Importance of Prayer

*Read Acts 17:27-28, Matthew 6:5-13*

Acts 17 has Paul engaging with teachers and philosophers in Athens regarding the large number of religious sculptures and other objects of worship in the city. He argues that the four walls of a temple cannot constrain the God who created this world. God gives life and breath to everything and provides for the needs of all people, hoping that they might reach out and find him, 'though he is not far away from any of us.' Our prayer is very much a part of this 'reaching out'

and embracing the relationship that exists between believers and God.

Jesus gives his disciples what we know as the Lord's Prayer. Within Matthew's Gospel, it follows instruction about the act of praying. Jesus assumes his disciples pray regularly, but it's not the location or action that is important, more the motive. He uses the example of those seen and heard on street corners or standing in the synagogue. Their reward comes from the admiration of others.

Jesus's message is that those who pray more in public than private, uttering long, repetitive, and often confusing prayers are more interested in human approval, but God understands our needs, and the language of our hearts, however articulate or not we are, is sufficient.

The framework of the Lord's Prayer reflects their own fellowship as it begins 'Our Father...'. The prayer does not start with self but with God, acknowledging his sovereignty and power in heaven and earth, and looking toward the fulfilment of God's kingdom on earth. Only then it turns to the needs of believers for their daily provision, and a need for forgiveness, guidance, and protection in the daily journey of faith.



Fritz von Uhde, *The Grace Prayer*, 1885

### Group discussion:

Q) Can we be guilty of trying to constrain God to the four walls of our worship space, be it cathedral, church, chapel, or community building, and how can we avoid that happening?

Q) Why is the Lord's prayer such a part of our worship today?

Q) Do you use a contemporary or traditional version of the Lord's Prayer, and does it matter?

## Praying together

*Read James 5:13-16, Acts 12:11-14*

Prayer can be both a personal conversation with God and a gathered offering where, with the friendship and security of the fellowship, individuals can share their own needs for prayer and concerns for others known to them.

Within a loving fellowship, says James, we can have the freedom to share joys, sorrows, and sins, and receive the prayerful support of those gathered. This time of prayer can involve songs of praise, anointing with oil and the laying on of hands.

Confessing sins to each other might refer to members of the fellowship who have fallen out, with the mutual confession bringing an opportunity of healing to both parties.

We can glimpse the power of prayer in the passage from Acts with Peter miraculously released from his prison cell. His first thought is to go straight to the home of Mary, the mother of John, one of the early meeting places of the church and presumably a substantial building, where Peter finds a room full of people in prayer.

We can see that he was the centre of their thoughts and prayers by the behaviour of the servant Rhoda, who is so excited at hearing his voice outside that she forgets to let him in before dashing to tell the others!

### Group discussion:

Q) How easy is it to share your own need of prayer within the wider fellowship, and could the church do anything to help?

Q) Have you had your own 'Rhoda' experience, with the shock of an answered prayer?

Q) How much time does your fellowship spend together in prayer, and is it enough to experience the benefits that James talks about?

## Pause for thought

Take a few minutes in the week thinking about that act of breaking and sharing bread, and what it means to your faith.

## Prayer

Bread of Life, you feed us  
through word and sacrament.  
The bread we share  
a remembrance  
of your presence with us.  
Strengthen us for service,  
that seeds we sow  
in fertile places  
might grow and flourish,  
that food we share  
in fellowship  
might nourish and revive,  
that words we share  
in our daily walk  
might glorify your name.  
Bread of Life, you feed us  
through word and sacrament  
that we might feed others.  
Blessed be your name!

When the journey is long  
and we hunger and thirst,  
Bread of Life, you sustain us.  
When the road is hard  
and our bodies weak  
Bread of Life, you heal us.  
When our spirits are low  
and we can't carry on  
Bread of Life, you revive us.  
When we offer our hand  
in love and in service  
Bread of life, you bless us.  
When the challenge is great  
and the workers are few  
Bread of Life, you empower us.  
When the victory is won  
and we see your face  
Bread of Life, you will rejoice with us!