

Food and Hospitality in the Gospel of Luke

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Luke is the Gospel in the Revised Common Lectionary for 2007.

Food is big in the Gospel of Luke.

With more than one hundred references to food and drink in *Luke* and *Acts*, it's an important theme. But what is Luke trying to get at?

Jesus and food

Perhaps the first thing is that Jesus himself spent time eating with friends. This must have been noticeable enough for the people who didn't like him to pick up on it and spread the rumor that "he is a glutton and a drinker" (*Luke 7:34*)! Mind you, Jesus himself is quoting his critics here, so it seems that he's prepared to wear that description, while pointing out that his critics weren't satisfied with John either, who avoided wine and was known for his strict diet. So Luke seems to be saying that if food and drink was one way in which Jesus connected with people, that's okay for us too.

Our daily bread

Luke is clear that God knows and cares about our bodies. Luke is one of the two Gospels in which Jesus teaches the Lord's Prayer (*Luke 11:2-4*; the other is *Matthew*). This prayer talks about both spiritual needs and bodily ones. God knows we need our daily bread and encourages us to ask.

Inclusiveness vs Preparation

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples who are on the road spreading the good news to 'eat whatever is set before you' (*10:8*). Strict Jews were pretty wary of what they ate, because they couldn't be sure whether it had been prepared in the right way, or even whether the ingredients had been properly tithed. So, Jesus' instructions stand out as more inclusive, more interested in the people than in the food itself and how it had been prepared.

God 'visits'

As it turns out, eating with people, receiving their hospitality, is an important way that God 'visits'. Luke is only Gospel that says that God 'visits' us (*Luke 1:68, 7:16, 19:44* and also *Acts 15:14*). Sometimes this word is translated as 'looks favorably', but the word means 'go to see a person with helpful intent'. If it is *God* who visits us in this way, giving and receiving hospitality take on a new significance.

Making connections

Hospitality in Luke is important, but of course it's not an end in itself. We know from Jesus' time with Martha and Mary (*Luke 10:38-41*) that the point is not ultimately the effort put into the food preparation, but whether or not the food becomes an occasion to really connect with Jesus, and through Jesus, with God.

Perhaps the best-known story in Luke of a meal becoming a place to encounter Jesus is the story of the two people on the road to Emmaus (*Luke 24:13-35*), who finally encountered Jesus when they broke bread together. That comes after the resurrection, right at the end of the Gospel, yet the connection of Jesus with food is hinted at right from the beginning, when we are told that Jesus was laid in a *manger* – a food trough (*Luke 2:1-7, 13*).

Giving and receiving hospitality

There are lots of other 'hospitality' stories in the Gospel of Luke:

- Jesus in the house of Simon the Pharisee (*Luke 7:36-50*)
- Jesus feeds five thousand (*9:10-17*)
- Prayer and hospitality (*11:1-13*)
- Humility and hospitality (*14:7-14*)
- Jesus and Zacchaeus (*19:1-10*)
- The Lord's supper (*22:7-13*).

There are also stories which tell about some who refuse to offer and receive hospitality, for example the Samaritan village (*9:50-55*) and some who encounter the mission of the seventy (*10:1-12*).

Luke makes it clear that receiving hospitality is as important as giving it.

What can we know about when and where Luke was writing?

From the elegant Greek in which Luke wrote, and from various hints about the importance of Rome, it seems clear that Luke lived in a city or town of the Roman Empire, perhaps even in Rome itself.

Luke must have been writing towards the end of the first century, because he makes it clear that he used other written 'Gospels' which were available (*Luke 1:1-3*). Most scholars think that Luke knew and used Mark's Gospel, but probably not Matthew's.

It's impossible to be certain of the date of any of the Gospels, but a scholar called Gerd Theissen has suggested that late 96, early 97 is plausible, because shortly after the death of the hated emperor Domitian (81-96) might have been a time when even an aristocratic or wealthy reader like the one to whom the Gospel is addressed – 'most excellent Theophilus' – would have welcomed the revolutionary tones of Mary's Song about the God who 'has brought down mighty kings from their thrones and lifted up the lowly' (*Luke 1:52*).

Multicultural society

It's likely that the Christian community within which Luke was writing was pretty multi-cultural, with people from Jewish, Gentile and even Samaritan backgrounds. There were also different socio-economic groups represented, with some wealthy associates as well as poor members, patrons as well as clients, and masters as well as slaves and dependents. Luke does not criticize the wealthy, provided they act with generosity and care towards others.

Is the Gospel making a difference?

In the ancient world, the social distinctions between people were reinforced by many customs. Meals were ceremonies which were formal, hierarchical occasions, an ideal forum for highlighting the differences between those who do, and those who do not 'conform'. For this reason, meals could show up whether the Gospel was really taking root and changing peoples' ways of relating to one another, or whether the surrounding culture still dictated what happened at Christian gatherings. So when Luke explores the Gospel in the setting of meals, he is inviting the reader to reflect on whether the Good News of God in Jesus was really making a difference in practical ways in their lives – see *Luke 14:7-14*, *15:11-32*, and *16:19-31* as examples.

It's worthwhile for us to ponder the very same questions in 2022!

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