



If you are like me, you look forward to Christmas partly because of the delicious food that is connected with it. Like so many Brits, I love Christmas cake, Christmas pudding, mince pies and of course turkey & stuffing, cranberry sauce and about 10 vegetables to go with it! There's nothing quite like it. I guess the bottom line is, I love eating, I love the variety of cuisine, I love the tastes and I plan to continue to love it until I can eat no longer. One of the qualities of Rite, my wife, is that she is an extremely good cook. Actually it was the fact that she was cooking, even as a student on our school of evangelism, that I got to hang out with her and develop a relationship. While everyone else started their duties after lunch, she started her cooking duty later which gave us the chance to chat as I did my work of duplicating teaching tapes - no podcasts back then. Thanks Barry for organising that for us! But wait, the focus of Christmas isn't about food but about celebrating Jesus' birthday together. It's about relating and enjoying one another as family and community. And of course, one of the ways we can do this best is around meals.

**Meals seemed to be very important in the life of Jesus:** I was recently reading "A meal with Jesus" by Tim Chester and want to share some of his thoughts in the following letter.

Jesus came to do three things: He came *not to be served but to serve* (mark 10:45), He came *to seek and save the lost* (Luke 19:10) and He came to ***eat and drink*** (Luke 7:34). The first two are statements of purpose and the third is a statement of method. Apart from all the parables Jesus taught involving eating, he spent much of his ministry time sitting with people enjoying meals:

- Luke 5 Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners at the home of Levi
- Luke 7 Jesus is anointed at the home of Simon the Pharisee during a meal
- Luke 9 Jesus feeds the five thousand
- Luke 10 Jesus eats in the home of Martha and Mary
- Luke 11 Jesus condemns the Pharisees and teachers of the law at a meal
- Luke 14 Jesus urges people to invite the poor to their meals rather than just their friends
- Luke 19 Jesus invites himself to dinner with Zacchaeus
- Luke 22 Jesus eats with his disciples at the last supper
- Luke 24 Jesus eats a meal with the two disciples in Emmaus
- Luke 24 Jesus eats fish with the disciples in Jerusalem

**Food as mission:** As we read about the early church in Acts, we see people meeting in homes, eating together and sharing fellowship. (Acts 2:46) Perhaps this is why hospitality was such an important value for an elder - they needed to live it out every time the church got together because it was around a meal. Meetings were meals! This sounds great. How about instead of Youth With A Meeting, we introduce Youth With A Meal (healthy & delicious ones)!! Rite and I have often said that the way to evangelise and reach out to the Spanish is over meals. When we first started a church here in our home, it was centred around eating together. There is something about food that brings out friendship and brings significance to a relationship. You really don't know someone until you go to their home! Interestingly the

word “companion” comes from the Latin “cum” (together) and “panis” (bread). Somehow food connects us. Conversation comes easier as we sit as equals around the table. Meals become social occasions that represent friendship, community and welcome. Tim Chester shares that “Jesus didn’t run projects, establish ministries, create programmes or put on events. He ate meals. If you routinely share meals and you have a passion for Jesus, then you’ll be doing mission.” We are not talking institutional hospitality here. In YWAM it’s easy to recognise the importance of hospitality because it’s one of our values. But often something is lost when we create a separate ministry out of hospitality. It is important that we all take responsibility in hospitality and don't expect the hospitality department to fulfil it all. As local churches we don't need to start a ministry in hospitality to minister to people, we just need to open our homes. In large YWAM bases, every family and single person is part of the hospitality ministry as they open their home or room.

The questions then are: “Do we make the most of our meals? Do we see eating as fuel for our bodies, and a task to keep our stomachs satisfied? Or do we see it as something far deeper and a time and space to stop, relax and connect with others as we eat and fellowship together?”

**Food as a meeting point:** Perhaps the custom of saying grace has become a little ritualistic for you, but I would encourage you to add some fresh inspiration and make the most of this opportunity of appreciating God’s wonderful gifts to us. An old tradition is that of the ‘daily office’ - taking specific times throughout the day where we connect with God and move towards the practice of praying without ceasing. Saying grace at three points during the day as we eat our meals can become something more than just a quick prayer to bless the food. It can be a time to give thanks for what God has done in the last few hours, a time of thanking him for his provision of the food and those who have served in providing it. Rite and I often take time in saying grace, to pray for our family scattered around the world as we sit to enjoy the meal together. It is also important to set aside the meal time as a sacred space for God to interact with us in our conversations around the table, as we slow down and stop from our work or ministry.

Robert Putman reveals that there has been a 33% decrease in families in the USA eating together over the last three decades and more than half of these families are watching TV as they eat. I wonder how this differs across the world. Certainly it’s true in the UK. There has also been a 45% decline in entertaining friends to home cooked meals. The average number of dinners together as a family is three per week with an average length of dinner being 20 minutes. This obviously doesn't allow much time for a depth of sharing.

**Food fuels intimacy:** Here at the retreat centre we have lost count of the meals we cook and serve each year but the number will be in the multiplied thousands. It’s very easy for us to lose sight of the value of eating together. It becomes another plate of food rather than an opportunity of connecting with each other and the Lord. To help keep the quality of relationship and pursue a greater depth of relating we have introduced a custom over the years of celebrating communion on a regular basis during our retreats. As people are finishing their meal, one of our staff will introduce a very short devotional and the symbols of bread/cracker & wine/juice. We will encourage a sharing of lives around the remembering of Jesus with the elements. It may be a short examen – when did you experience God today,

and when did you feel he was at a distance? It could be giving people an opportunity of sharing something they have learned recently or give a toast to the Lord with an affirmation of who he is. We always finish with praying with one another at the table, worship and thanksgiving to God and blessing one another. We have had such a variety in sharing different aspects of our life as we remember Jesus which stops it becoming predictable and brings new life to the celebration of breaking bread together. Develop your own creative ideas so that as you remember Jesus it remains fresh, relevant and personal.

Hospitality involves welcoming, creating space, listening, paying attention and providing meals. It also has a way of slowing things down. Some of us don't like that. I remember at one YWAM base we introduced a rule that no one could leave the table until announcements were made which encouraged conversation even if you had finished eating. And the announcements were never made until we had been sitting for at least 30 minutes. It was good for everyone to slow down and take a breath. It was 'good time wasting' - it was being community together. Sharing a meal is not the only way to build relationships but it is number one on my list. Meals can bring you close.

**Food can be a catalyst for depth of relationship:** Sometimes we have to be a little formal to move things into the next level of conversation. During our retreats this is where celebrating communion comes in. Tim Chester shares:

- In a busy culture with people desperate to succeed, we practice in communion resting on the finished work of Christ.
- In a fragmented culture that is radically individualistic, we practice in communion belonging to one another.
- In a dissatisfied culture of constant striving, we practice in communion receiving this world with joy as a gift from God.
- In a narcissistic culture of self fulfilment, we practice in communion joyous self denial and service.
- In a proud culture of self promotion, we practice in communion humility and generosity.

All these practices are habit forming and so seep into the rest of our lives.

As we look back over our family life together, I would say that a high percentage of parenting took place over our meal table. It still does when we are together. It tends to be the only time during the day where we have a fixed audience and nobody is involved in any other tasks (no phones allowed!). Having begun with a meaningful prayer of grace that enables us to engage or reengage with God, we then engage with each other. We will often share some small talk as we get settled, share laughter and have fun but also move on to talk about some important issues. Things we have been thinking about, questions we have, dilemmas we are working through, insights, ideas, etc. Then we can go deeper as the environment allows. "So, what do you think about..., how are you feeling about..." If you have seen the TV show, 'Bluebloods', the police family do a lot of this kind of sharing at the meal table. It's the one time they are all together during the day and in each episode there is some kind of dilemma or a particular person that is the focus. They debrief their days together and build a strong family unit in the process.

During our couples retreats we have several special intimate meals where couples eat at their own tables and the staff act as waiters/waitresses. It's amazing how serving someone can change the dynamics of the relationship. The leader who serves at table is no longer aloof but has become a real person - especially when in the serving there can be some fun banter and affirmation of the individuals. I have experienced quite an emotional response from a number of people being ministered to in this way.

**Food is part of God's great creativity:** Remember the story of Elijah running for his life from Queen Jezebel, after the miracle offering at mount Carmel. He was given a special bread that kept him running for 40 days and 40 nights. Food could have been a fuel for us just like that special bread and we simply take our daily pill or piece of bread that keeps us going for the next day. But no, God gave us a multitude of different vegetables, grains, fruit and spices that combine to make millions of meals with an incredible variety of tastes. The world is more delicious than it needs to be. Why did God go to all the trouble? Because there is more to meals than feeding the body. Food is a gift to enable us to enter into another space with God and others. How rich our lives as YWAMers have become sharing different cultural foods with an incredible mix of nationalities on our teams and bases. Eating is sacred! Food is the vehicle for God's main agenda - relationship. We are often told to not make food our god. Food like anything can become addictive, so let's be on guard, utilise self control but enjoy and appreciate God's bountiful gifts to us.

Jesus frequented parties because he knew that it was there he would be able to interact with people and build relationship. So we need to develop a passion for parties - of course along with our passion for Jesus and our passion for people. Use any excuse for a party. We have made the most of every kind of celebration:

- public holidays like new year, Easter, Pentecost, Thanksgiving, Christmas, etc.
- personal celebrations like birthdays, anniversaries, passing exams, milestone events, house warming, baby showers, etc.
- special events like love feasts during a training school, graduation, sporting events, cultural feasts, etc.

The beauty of meals is that we don't have to remember to eat! Meal times are in our schedule already. So it's simply making more of these meal times and experiencing God in the midst. How about giving a gift to Jesus in this new year of committing your whole meal times to him and see what added blessings flow as a result.

As I tuck into a delicious mince pie, I want to wish you a very happy and fruitful new year.

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P.S. If you want some ideas on '*how to create more meaningful meals*', just google it and you will find all kinds of good suggestions. Use your creative juices to add that little intentionality to the meal time that makes all the difference.