

Meeting moments (1) Five mealtime moments

Aims

The following 'Mealtime Moments' aim to be

- flexible, adaptable and easy to use;
- used at times when people are sharing food;

For example they could be used as a series for a Luncheon Club, or one could be selected for an event such as a Harvest Supper. Use them in whatever way works best for your group. Better still, create some of your own!



Structure

Each 'moment' is based around a Bible passage. This is followed by questions and reflections. These are alternatives. Do not use both in one session. Decide whether your group is likely to get into discussion over the questions – perhaps round small tables – or whether they would prefer to be given additional food for individual thought. If you use both, it might seem as if the Reflection provides the 'right' answers to the Questions, which is not at all the case! It is just one person's reflection on the text.

A closing prayer is provided to draw things together, whichever route you have taken.

1: Unexpected guests for Abraham and Sarah

Genesis 18:1-8

'The Lord appeared to Abraham by the Oak trees of Mamre, as he was sitting at the opening of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing over against him. On seeing them, he hurried from his tent door to meet them. Bowing low, he said, 'Sirs, if I have deserved your favour, do not go past your servant without a visit. Let me send for some water so that you may bathe your feet; and rest under this tree, while I fetch a little food so that you may refresh yourselves. Afterwards you may continue the journey which has brought you my way.' They said, 'Very well, do as you say.' So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah and said, 'Quick, take three measures of flour, knead it, and make cakes.' He then hastened to the herd, chose a fine, tender calf, and gave it to a servant, who prepared it at once. He took curds and milk and the calf which was now ready, set it all before them, and there under the tree waited on them himself while they ate.

Questions

- 1) How would you have felt if you had been one of Abraham's guests?
- 2) What is welcoming about us as a group/fellowship?
- 3) What could we do to make people feel more welcome without being overwhelmed?

or

Reflection

Churches like to think of themselves as welcoming and friendly places, but few of us would ever dream of taking our hospitality to the lengths Abraham does. Three complete strangers pass his encampment, and he treats them as honoured guests. It's certainly not a question of a brief chat over a cup of tea and perhaps a piece of cake. He makes them comfortable, personally makes arrangements for a substantial meal, presumably entertains them while it is being prepared, and then serves them himself.

Of course, most of the time such levels of hospitality are not called for, and in our society pressing strangers to stay might be considered slightly strange, if not downright odd.

However, there may be times when it is the right thing to do, and if we strive to be open to strangers, making our welcome genuine and generous, then the chances are we will offer hospitality at the appropriate level.

Even so, Abraham's response reminds us that we should not leave hospitality just to those who always do it, the catering committee or whoever. Everyone can play a part in being hospitable. Don't wait for someone else to make the tea or offer a stranger a seat at your table: be ready to do what you can to entertain angels.

Prayer

Generous God,
you have promised that whenever
we turn to you, you will be there;
whenever we cry out to you, you
will listen and never turn us away.
Help us to be opening and
welcoming in your name.
Give us the confidence to
recognise that when we welcome
strangers,
we are putting our trust not in
human nature but in you.
So may the meals we share be a
foretaste of the food of heaven.



2: A bowl of soup for Esau

Genesis 25:29-34

'One day Jacob was preparing broth when Esau came in from the country, exhausted. He said to Jacob, 'I am exhausted; give me a helping of that red broth.' This is why he was called Edom. Jacob retorted, 'Not till you sell me your rights as the firstborn.' Esau replied, 'Here I am at death's door; what use is a birthright to me?' Jacob said, 'First give me your oath!' So he gave him his oath and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and some lentil broth, and he ate and drank and went his way. Esau showed by this how little he valued his birthright.'

Questions

- 1) What does this story tell us about the character of each of the brothers?
- 2) Jacob exploited Esau's weakness in order to get what he wanted. In what ways does this happen in our society or community?
- 3) Countries, including ours, often behave towards each other in this sort of way. How can we influence the attitudes and behaviour of our society or community?

or

Reflection

Esau was tired and hungry after his hunting trip, but he wasn't actually at death's door. Have you ever exclaimed 'I'm *starving*' at the end of a long day, or even a long morning? The smell of something good cooking starts one's tummy rumbling, and the thought of food is very welcome. Jacob clearly knew his brother had a bit of a weakness in that area and he exploited his vulnerability, waiting with a delicious stew wafting enticing smells into the air. Esau was so hungry, perhaps one might say greedy, that he could think of nothing else. At that moment, the most important thing in the world to him was having some of that stew. The incident does not show either brother in a good light: Esau was greedy, thoughtless, not considering the consequences of his actions or the impact they might have on others, and Jacob was cold, calculating and lacking in compassion, exploiting his brother's weakness to manipulate the situation for his own ends.

We all know that there are many people in the world who are in genuine and extreme need, struggling to survive at all. Countries with more wealth and power often behave towards such people much as Jacob did to Esau, offering aid and support on certain conditions, which starving people are not in a position to refuse. Sometimes they find themselves in crippling debt, or committed to political and military alliances which have little or nothing to do with the interests of their own country. Sooner or later, such arrangements usually involve people in struggling countries in even greater misery and deprivation than they were suffering in the first place. Although it may seem that we can have no influence over such matters, the impact of the Drop the Debt campaign shows that we can make a difference, and that it is worth standing up for compassion rather than exploitation. We can choose to share our stew without demanding anything in return.

Prayer

Merciful God, you know our vulnerability.

May we not try to defend our own weaknesses by exploiting those of others, but keep in mind that we are made in your image, all of us of equal worth.

Inspire us to give without counting the cost or expecting something in return.

3: Famine in Zarephath

1 Kings 17:7-16

After a while the stream dried up, for there had been no rain in the land. Then the word of the Lord came to him: 'Go now to Zarephath, village of Sidon, and stay there; I have commanded a widow there to feed you.' He went off to Zarephath, and when he reached the entrance to the village, he saw a widow gathering sticks. He called to her, 'Please bring me a little water in a pitcher to drink.' As she went to fetch it, he called after her, 'Bring me, please, a piece of bread as well.' But she

answered, 'As the Lord you God lives, I have no food baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a flask. I am just gathering two or three sticks to go and cook it for my son and myself before we die.' 'Have no fear,' said Elijah; 'go and do as you have said. But first make a small cake from what you have and bring it out to me, and after that make something for your son and yourself. For this is the word of the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of flour will not give out, nor the flask of oil fail, until the Lord sends rain on the land.' She went and did as Elijah had said, and there was food for him and for her and her family for a long time. The jar of flour did not give out, nor did the flask of oil fail, as the word of the Lord foretold through Elijah.

Questions

- 1) If you had been the widow, what would you have said to Elijah?
- 2) The seriousness of the situation made both the woman and Elijah recognise that they were dependent on God and on each other. Have there been moments in you life when you have come to that same recognition?
- 3) Who are the people who seem to you to live as it they are completely dependant on God?

or

Reflection

This story makes me think of the line in the Lord's Prayer: 'give us this day our daily bread'. God does indeed supply their daily bread, sufficient for their needs until the end of the drought, just as he supplied Manna in the desert. There is nothing to spare, but neither are they ever left without anything at all. The woman is very trusting, giving the last food that she has to Elijah, a complete stranger. Perhaps she realises that she has nothing to lose: if Elijah does not keep his word, starving one day sooner will make very little difference anyway. Given the situation, they are all totally dependent on God, and they recognise that fact. Without their mutual trust and their reliance on God, all three of them would probably have starved.

Often the surplus of material wealth around us disguises our need for God, and for each other. We tend to think of that as a particularly modern, western phenomenon, but in fact it afflicts every generation, as the Bible makes clear. Remember the rich young ruler who asked Jesus how he might inherit eternal life? He was obeying all the commandments, but he couldn't bring himself to part with his wealth and possessions. Attachment to material possessions and the status they impart is nothing new, not a sign of the times but a fundamental aspect of the human condition. That is not to say that we should just shrug our shoulders and accept it as inevitable. On the contrary, the People of God throughout history have been urged to strive against materialism, to clear their minds and hearts to focus on the things that really matter, and we are no different. Not that we should stop making any effort to take care of ourselves and simply sit back and wait for miraculous divine intervention: that would be failing to use our own abilities, and failing to appreciate God's gifts to us. It would be bad stewardship, and it would be putting God to the test. Usually, God's provision reaches us through the actions of other people, which means that we should always be open to seeing God at work in others. It also means we should be alert and ready to respond when God seeks to use us as a means of providing for the needs of others.

Prayer

Loving God, giver of all good things,
you have told us never to be anxious about food or clothing.
May we be good stewards of all that you provide, doing what we can to share the earth's
resources more fairly, so that all may have what they need.

4: Eating with sinners

Matthew 9:9-13

As he went on from there Jesus saw a man named Matthew at his seat in the custom-house, and he said to him, 'Follow me'; and Matthew rose and followed him. When Jesus was having a meal in the house, many tax-collectors and sinners were seated with him and his disciples. Noticing this, the Pharisees said to his disciples, 'Why is it that your teacher eats and drinks with tax-collectors and sinners?' Hearing this he said, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. Go and learn what this text means, "I require mercy, not sacrifice." I did not come to call the virtuous, but sinners.'

Questions

- 1) Who are the 'tax-collectors and sinners' in our society?
- 2) What would your reaction be if you heard that a church leader had been partying with them?
- 3) What do you think the text "I require mercy, not sacrifice" means for us today?

or

Reflection

The tax-collectors and sinners were partying, enjoying a good meal with Jesus and his disciples. To the Pharisees, that just confirmed all the bad things about their characters, as is indicated by the way in which most of the people there are simply lumped together as 'sinners' – nothing specific, no details given, but obviously well known to the Pharisees as being the wrong sort of people. Yet what was actually happening was a celebratory feast, an expression of gratitude that they, too, could receive God's forgiveness and love. They had been transformed, but the Pharisees couldn't see it. Their prejudices were too firmly entrenched, their automatic responses too conditioned. They could not believe that God would act in a way so contrary to their expectations and experience. That's very understandable. If they had been willing to accept the possibility that their expectations had been wrong, and that the people they regarded as 'sinners', well past hope of redemption, could be invited to share God's banquet, that would have meant that they had to change their understanding, their teaching and their own attitudes and behaviour completely – not an easy thing for anyone to do, let alone people with power and authority and status to defend.

It is all too easy for attitudes to become entrenched and for prejudices to form. We, too, have to keep on examining and challenging our own reactions, questioning the assumptions we make about others, and making the effort to get to know people as individuals, rather than believing that we know what they are like because we know where they live, or how they behave, or who their friends are, or what country they come from. We must also be very careful not to fall into the habit of thinking we know what God wants,

whom God loves and how God expresses favour. It is all too easy to assume that earthly wealth and power are a sign of divine approbation, but the Gospel leaves us in no doubt that that is not the case.

Prayer

Loving God, you know us better even than we know ourselves.

Help us to see each other as you see us, not judging them according to rank or status, appearance or background, occupation or lifestyle; but valuing them for themselves and seeing their unique potential.

May we treat others with the same understanding and compassion as we would like to receive ourselves.



5: Food in the wilderness

1 Kings 19:1-9

When Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done and how he had put all the prophets to the sword, she sent this message to Elijah, 'The gods do the same to me and more, unless by this time tomorrow I have taken your life as you took theirs.' In fear he fled for his life, and when he reached Beersheba in Judah he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, and sitting down under it he prayed for death: 'It is enough,' he said; 'now, Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers before me.' He lay down under the bush and, while he slept, an angel touched him and said, 'Rise and eat.' He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones and a pitcher of water. He ate and drank and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came again and touched him a second time, saying, 'Rise and eat; the journey is too much for you.' he rose and ate and drank and, sustained by this food, he went on for forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God. There he entered a cave where he spent the night.

Questions

- 1) Have there ever been times in your life when you just felt like giving up?
- 2) What were the factors involved? Exhaustion? Disappointment? The feeling that you had given your all and it wasn't enough?
- 3) What helped you recover from that state? In what ways did you have a sense of God's presence with you, either directly or through the support of others?

or

Reflection

It seems pretty hard on Elijah. He's just had the day of his life – his finest hour, if you like – defeating the prophets of Baal in a strange but very dramatic sacrifice contest, which inspired the Israelites to turn back to God, and then after all that, and despite the years of drought and famine, somehow finding the energy to run in front of the king's chariot all the

way back to the palace. You would have thought he'd be resting on his laurels, enjoying his moment of triumph, basking in a bit of glory, but instead he finds himself running for his life, alone and exhausted. It's not surprising he prays for death. He feels he's done absolutely everything he can, given his last ounce, and it hasn't been enough. He's done in, emotionally and physically completely drained. He feels as if, despite all his efforts, he's let God down, but God knows better. Elijah's prayer is answered not with the swift end he has asked for, but with rest, food and drink, and also a new objective, and new target to aim for, an appointment with God at Mount Horeb.

Sometimes it's a good thing not to get what we ask for! God knows our needs even better than we know them ourselves, knows that sometimes we need a bit of a break, time to rest and recover our strength, and also that one of the best ways of getting over a sense of failure or disappointment is to set a new target, focus on a new objective, start working to a new plan. It is easy to feel under pressure to try ever harder, to feel that when things don't work out it must be down to a lack of effort or faith on our part, and then we ask ourselves what more we could possibly have done, and come to the despairing conclusion that we have no more to offer, and everything is hopeless. At those times, we should remind ourselves that even Elijah, the greatest of all the prophets, had moments of despair, and the reassuring response from God was not to tell him he should have tried harder, but to recommend a period of rest and recuperation.

Prayer

Loving God, you know us better than we know ourselves.

Meet us where we are, whether down and out or on the up.

Release us from feelings of guilt and inadequacy, and help us to recognise our gifts and achievements, so that we may face the challenges ahead with renewed hope and enthusiasm.

Evaluation

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

The Next Step

If you want more meeting moments then Meeting moments 2 is for people who are planning to meet with someone in their own home.

If you have written some meeting moments yourself, why not send them in?