

Meals and Memory

Acts 3:3-15, 17-19; I John 2:1-5a; Luke 24: 35-48

April 30, 2006

Sharing meals became the disciples' signature.

And for the people who come to the US to work in our fields, for them too sharing meals is almost a ritual. At least for the ones I know who grew up working in Mexican fields, for them meals were shared among members of their family and involved much more than taking in food.

It was Jesus who gave meaning to meals shared by a group. His dreams of the Kingdom of God were clarified in and through meals taken among brothers and equals. This is so much the case that for us also the act of sharing a little bread and wine has become the central event of the faith we celebrate every Sunday.

That's why the selection from Luke's Gospel today shows the risen Christ asking for something to eat. And once they sit down together with him, that handful of disciples glimpses the identity of the defeated-resurrected one and finally understands what was written about him in the Old Testament. The shared meal gives new dimension to their vocation and mission.

It's odd, the role North American culture gives to eating. Seldom is it an end in itself. People eat together when they're doing business together— "working lunches," they say. Eating is a pragmatic affair. The meal itself is of little interest. It is "fast food," something you gobble up on your way to something else.

In spite of that it's still true that I have enjoyed the true conviviality of mealtime even in western New York. It happens when a family from the Caribbean invites me to dinner or when I'm in the home of a migrant family or in a migrant camp. At such times eating has no other object than as a reason for gathering and for the enjoyment that comes from gathering. But let it be clear that this happens not only in homes and at leisure. Particularly in the harvest season, when the rhythm of work is exhausting— it is there that I have lived most deeply the experience of mealtime as "recognition," a time of peace and joy, a taste of the kind of moment the disciples experienced when they recognized the risen one in their midst. For me, the moment came while we were sitting under a tree together, sharing some tacos heated up on the spot. There were no other motives, no business to conduct, no other place to get to (as when you find yourself keeping an eye on your watch during a "lunch meeting"). There was only the gathering itself.

A meal like that reconnects you to what is most human in yourself and in the others sharing the meal with you. "It is really I...not a ghost." "You are a person...not a shadow."

Our Eucharists, now so ritualized, aspire to connect us with the experience of conviviality or better yet mealtime-as-recognition that the people of our migrant communities have already tasted. With the experience of Jesus, the rejected one, whose way of life has become a model for us— where Jesus is the fellow diner who gathers and inspires not only us but everyone else.

For me the Eucharists that come closest to this experience are those we've enjoyed in the some of the migrant camps... when the participants lay down their sacks as they return from picking apples. The Celebration unites us as we tell the stories of our comings and goings, our fallings-down and risings. We allow the Lord to speak to us as

we read his word. And almost always it happens that very early, before leaving for work that day, the team has prepared something to eat for sharing after the Eucharist.

At that moment the Spirit of the crucified and resurrected one opens our understanding so that we might comprehend the Word that has become reality in our lives, and then he sends us to be his witnesses.