

## Jesus ate in their presence

Luke 24:36-49

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Many of you have no doubt read the sensational articles published shortly before Easter about the discovery of the long-lost Gospel of Judas. This ancient text has been lost from sight for centuries, with the only information we had about it coming from the early church writers who condemned it as false. For instance, Irenaeus, the first systematic theologian in Christian history, writing in the second century, stated that some considered that “Judas alone, knowing the truth as no others did, accomplished the mystery of the betrayal; by him all things, both earthly and heavenly, were thus thrown into confusion. They produce a fictitious history of this kind, which they style the gospel of Judas.” [*Against Heresies* 1.31.1. ANF 1, p. 358.] The rediscovery of this lost gospel is indeed of some interest to scholars and historians. But is it of any significance for us as believers? Should we welcome it, as some have, as providing for us a fresh new perspective on the story of Jesus that should be taken seriously? I think not, in fact, from what has been published thus far of this gospel, there is little to challenge the assessment of Irenaeus in the second century, that it is a fictitious history which throws all things into confusion, in other words, it is patently false and hence spiritually destructive.

That such a gospel should be welcomed by some as shedding new light on the faith of Christians is a sign not of openness to new ideas, but of ignorance of old ones, in other words, this attitude discounts the depth of insight and understanding which was brought to bear on the gospel of Judas by Irenaeus at the time when this gospel, and others like it, was in vogue. Unlike Irenaeus, we are told by some that we should see such texts as offering fresh theological insights which give us a fresh perspective on an old tired story we all know all too well. Irenaeus, however, was not seeing an interesting new idea presented for discussion, but a patently false picture of Jesus, which if accepted would lead not to new insight and intellectual stimulation, but spiritual decay and deception, in other words, a heresy. It is not for nothing that some have spoken of “the cruelty of heresy.” For heresy is not simply a challenge to accepted thinking, or an intellectual challenge upsetting to people who hold to

shallow and outdated religious views, or a threat to the entrenched power of the establishment in the church. Irenaeus, like many of his time, recognized heresy for what it was: falsehoods which are spiritually destructive of true faith, leading not to liberation and excitement, but to spiritual despair and advocacy of degenerate lifestyles.

This is perfectly evident in the “gospel of Judas,” where Judas is supposedly commended by Jesus as having seen the truth of his message, unlike the other disciples. Jesus, this gospel claims, conspired with Judas to be killed so as to release the Christ from the prison of the flesh, the body of Jesus, thus achieving salvation for himself and showing us the way in which we can achieve salvation for ourselves as well. And this is one of the first and worst of the cruelties of heresy: that Jesus does not provide us with salvation, but shows us how we can save ourselves by imitating him. And how do we achieve this salvation? That is tied to the view expressed in this false gospel – the cause of our problems is the fact that we are imprisoned in the body of flesh because of the vindictiveness of the evil god of the Old Testament, the Creator, who gave us harsh laws to follow and punishes everyone who deviates from them. This harsh god is supposedly in conflict with the true god, the high god followed by the Christ, who is a god of love and forgiveness, accepting everyone with their diversity and not imposing any rules on them. Salvation for these heretics came from being initiated into the true knowledge about the identity of god and the cause of our problems, which is why they were called Gnostics, from the Greek word for knowledge.

It may come as something of a surprise, but it is my belief that if Irenaeus were to visit our churches today, he would see our views as closer to the heresies of the Gnostics than to the gospel as he understood it. We can see this from the passage from Luke which we have heard read for us this morning. Let’s look more closely at this passage, and on the way compare it with the heresies of the Gnostics.

The story opens with the disciples talking amongst themselves about the report they had heard from the two disciples who had walked and talked with the risen Jesus, unbeknownst to them, on the way to Emmaus, and how he had taught them from the Old Testament, the Scriptures, which spoke about him and all the things he came to accomplish and fulfill. The disciples did not recognize Jesus, but only as the Gospel

of Luke tells us, because God hid this from them. It was only after Jesus had completed his teaching, and broke bread with them, that they were allowed to recognize who he was. Immediately they ran back to Jerusalem and reported to the other disciples that they had met the risen Jesus.

It was at this point that Jesus appears among them. “Peace be with you,” he said. While this was the standard greeting of the day, it was also necessary to calm down the disciples, who were in contemporary terms, “freaked” by what they saw, or more to the point, as the Gospel makes clear, what they thought they saw. For their first impression, despite a number of reports they had just heard about various people meeting Jesus risen from the dead, was that they were seeing a ghost. This is one of the great mysteries of the Scriptures: the disciples, who had experienced many amazing deeds performed by Jesus, including raising a number of people from the dead, and who had been told repeatedly by Jesus that he would rise from the dead just as it had now happened, still did not appreciate that it had come true. So Jesus had to demonstrate to them that he was not a ghost, not an apparition, not the joint hallucination generated by the fears and insecurities of people desperately seeking something to hold on to after the tragic death of their leader. Jesus was really there, in the flesh, as he said to them, “Touch me and see, a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.” And when even this was not enough, he resorted to the next proof he was really alive and present with them bodily – he asked for something to eat, which he then ate in front of them.

This would be impossible in the Gospel of Judas – which as a Gnostic gospel rejected the idea that the Christ would want to come back to the corrupt body of the flesh of Jesus in which he had previously been imprisoned. And not only that, but eating? That was the sure sign of bondage to the flesh – the Gnostic ideal was to escape from everything to do with the body, and especially having to eat. The Gnostic view denigrated everything to do with the body, seeing this as the cause of their problems, which surprisingly perhaps led to two quite opposite attitudes. The first was that as the body was the cause of our problems, the way to reduce these problems was to minimise the extent to which the body placed demands on us. Hence one wing of the Gnostic movement advocated extreme asceticism: fasting, simple food, rejection of marriage and all sexual activity, and even basic hygiene. The other wing of the

Gnostic movement took the opposite approach: since the body was an imposition on the spiritual being trapped inside it, it was doomed to perish when liberation from the body was achieved, so as it was of no value, there was nothing wrong with using the body for enjoyment. Hence this attitude led to gluttony, drunkenness, sexual promiscuity, and every other form of excess. Both attitudes were opposites, but had the same origin: denigration of the goodness of the human body, and a denial that it was a creation of God to be honoured and valued. Hence it was seen as a prison for the spiritual being, which was the cause of its problems from which salvation would release us. This is the opposite of the biblical teaching that God made us as bodily beings, not as a punishment, but because it was his good gift.

By eating in front of the disciples, Jesus was demonstrating not only that he was indeed still incarnate in a truly human body, but was even not only able but willing and keen to eat something. God does not despise our earthly bodies: he created them for us, he created us as bodily beings, and it as bodily beings that we shall enter into the eternal kingdom with Christ.

Jesus then explained to them that all that had happened was what was written about him in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. In other words, he used the standard Jewish method of referring to the Old Testament, still in use today among Jews, of the three-fold division of the Scriptures: the books of Moses, the Prophets, and the other writings, here called Psalms as the most prominent section of that part of the Old Testament. What was going on? Jesus was in fact claiming that the whole of the Old Testament spoke about him and his mission. This is in contrast to the Gnostic view that the Old Testament teaches a cruel, vindictive, legalistic god who should be rejected by those who have found a god of love and forgiveness.

Jesus then opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures: by a special work of grace through the Holy Spirit, they were enabled to see what previously their limited perceptions could not: that the Scriptures spoke the truth about what Jesus had done, and the significance of what he had accomplished. When we read that their minds were opened to understand the Scriptures, this is not the private, esoteric illumination of the Gnostics, but the ability to know the truth given to all who are open to the Spirit of God. The difference is significant: we teach that the Scriptures are able to be received as true by anyone who trusts the Holy Spirit to open their

hearts and is prepared to receive them in faith. What is written is written, and can be read by all, so that what is perceived in faith is not something inaccessible to the unbeliever, but something unacceptable to the unbeliever. The Gnostics, however, taught a secret knowledge that was restricted to the circle of the initiated; it was not public knowledge. We believe, however, that the Christian faith is able to be taught to anyone, but can only be received as truth by those whose hearts are opened by the Holy Spirit to believe. We do not have secret teachings that are revealed only to the initiated.

The third point of difference with Gnosticism is that Christ has won redemption for us from the power of death and sin, and through faith in him, we can be saved. The Gnostics, however, taught that the secret knowledge they purveyed was what was needed to know how to achieve your own salvation – those who were not initiated were unable to save themselves as they did not know how. But even the initiated had to achieve their salvation through seeking to escape from the limitations of the flesh which was imposed on them by the evil creator god. There was no conception that Christ had come to save us through his redeeming work; all he achieved was to demonstrate to us how we should go about saving ourselves. He is the example to follow, not the saviour who has accomplished redemption on our behalf.

But overall, the most important distinction between Christian faith and the false hope of Gnosticism, is that Jesus has, as the Scriptures testify, risen from the dead in fully bodily form. The resurrection of Jesus has been downplayed, de-emphasised, minimized and even denied by many who otherwise profess to be Christians. But it is clear from the Scriptures, and from the testimony of many multitudes of believers, that the resurrection of Jesus in fully human, fully bodily form, is the essence of our faith. As soon as we deny that Jesus truly is raised from the dead, then we are no longer able to claim to be authentic Christians. For the resurrection of Jesus is not just a strange and unusual event which we are asked to accept actually happened, it is in fact the centre and meaning of what it is to be Christian. For if Jesus did not rise from the dead, as Paul tells us, then our faith is empty and futile, and we have no hope of salvation. Not because we are just expected to accept that it happened, but because if it did not happen, then everything we believe is pointless because the resurrection of

Jesus was the indispensable culmination of all that Jesus came to do. Without the resurrection of Jesus, Christianity is empty and worthless.

It is not enough to hold to his so-called “ethical teaching” as if that in itself is of value, for the simple reason that Jesus did not come to teach us how to live, he came to teach us where to find life – in repentance and faith that God has accomplished all that is necessary for our redemption in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus – and in fact it does not end there – we are also dependent for our full redemption on his ascension into heaven to receive the kingdom from the Father, the sending of the Holy Spirit to be our comforter, strength and guide. We also wait for the return of Christ to earth in glory and triumph, at which time those who believe and trust in him who are alive will be transformed, and the believers who have died will be raised to life and transformed in immortality. So our redemption is not yet complete; because we have not yet been transformed and made immortal in order to spend eternity with Christ. But all that this entails will need to wait for another day for us to explore in greater depth.

In the meantime, we need to focus on the resurrection of Jesus. Firstly, it was the genuine resurrection of a truly human, thoroughly dead person. Jesus was born fully human, just like us in every way, and he lived like us in every way, experiencing all that we experience, except that he, unlike us, lived a life of obedience without sin. But that does not make Jesus less than human; in fact, he was the only true human there has yet been, the rest of us are less than fully human because of our sin. Sin, in fact, dehumanises us. It is true that our conception of what it means to be human is usually developed from following and imitating others, but we are thereby replicating a flawed model. It has been said, that to err is human, and to forgive divine. The second half of that statement is certainly true, in that our God is a loving and forgiving God, but the first half is not true to Scripture: to err is to deny our humanity and to be less than fully human, that is, to be less than what we were meant to be. If we recall for a moment what the Scriptures tell us, we were created by God as bodily beings, in other words, being a person is to be of a bodily nature. You may recognise that it is hard to express here what I am trying to say. The reason is that we are still prone to talk about ourselves in ways which are not true to Scripture. There are two forms of expression I particularly want to avoid, firstly, that we have bodies, and secondly, that we are

bodies. The first could be called the evangelical error, the second could be called the liberal error. If we take these forms of expressions and consider them in more depth, we can readily see where the problems lie.

Firstly, we do not **have** bodies. As soon as you take that option, you then are faced with a new problem to solve, that is, what is it that **has** the body? To say I have a body is to distinguish between the I and the body, which then must be related in some way, in this case, by saying the I owns, possesses, occupies, a body. This then follows the Gnostic path by downgrading the body as something less than desirable, since what is important is not the body but the **I** that has or possesses the body. It is the I that is saved, that experiences eternity in heaven with Jesus. What about the body? Well the body is buried, or increasingly even among Christians, cremated – something that I believe we should not do, as it is inescapably entwined with non-Christian attitudes towards death as either expressing despair that the one who has died will ever be able to give and receive our love again, hence we dispose of the body as it will never live again, or else we denigrate the value of the body, and are quite happy to dispose of it through cremation because we have finished with it and will never need it again. Christianity makes the burial of the body a significant act, as it is placed in the earth in the confident hope and expectation that from there the one who has died will be raised again in bodily form. And it is only as bodily beings, fully human as we are now, except without sin, and glorified and made immortal, that we will share in the eternal kingdom. Many Christians, even those who profess to believe the Scriptures, are incredibly simply unaware that the centre and hope of the Christian faith depends on resurrection, not simply for Jesus, but for all believers. For without the resurrection, there is no future life for us as human beings, that is, as inescapably bodily beings. For to be human is to be bodily beings: anything less than that is a departure from Scripture.

The second error, expressed by many liberal Christians as well as unbelievers, is that we are bodies – that is, when the body dies the person is finished with, and there is nothing more for us beyond death. Death is the end, there is no afterlife, no heaven, no resurrection – nothing. Once you are dead you are gone, and the best we can hope for is that those who come after us will treasure us in their memories. And this is precisely what liberals teach concerning the death of Jesus – he is dead and gone, but

the beautiful stories and helpful moral teaching (well, at least some of it, as long as it does not conflict with our more enlightened views about sexuality, politics and economics), will live on in our memory as something of value. And that is not Christian in any shape or form. Death is not the end, it is a transition from this life to life for eternity, after undergoing resurrection and being transformed into immortality.

So how should we then talk about ourselves? I think we can safely say that we are bodily beings, as long as we understand that to mean that we are not just bodily beings in the same way as the animals: humans are different and are able to engage in activities that are impossible for animals, the most important of these being the ability to respond in faith to God and to form a relationship of trust and love towards him. That we are something that merely inhabits a body is not true to Christian faith: without a body we are not human, but being human is not just being a body. Going further into this topic will take us too far from our subject and take too long, but it is important as a basis for understanding what the Scripture teaches us about the death and resurrection of Jesus. He was truly bodily in every way, so he was able to die just the same as any other human being. And being dead, he was just like every other human being: incapable of anything at all.

It is essential for a correct understanding of Scripture to appreciate that Jesus did not lie waiting in the tomb for that glorious first Easter Sunday, then when it was time, he came back to life and left the tomb. Jesus was dead, unable to do anything, he was dependent totally on the Father raising him. That was the essence and the depth of his trust: that even when going through the depths of despair and desertion on the cross, he still trusted that the Father would raise him again from the dead. There was nothing he could do about it; if the Father did not act, then he would stay dead, and that would be the end of that. Liberals may say, well so what, that what did happen, Jesus really was dead and stayed dead, and the body, or what is left of it, is still in a tomb somewhere, but the spirit of his teaching and the power of his love lives on in our memories and hearts.

I would respond to that, so what, that does not achieve what is needed for our salvation. For the human problem is not our lack of teaching and the weakness of our love, but that we are alienated from God, and doomed to death as a result of the sin of all humanity. Jesus has lived a life of love and obedience, and has died to pay the

penalty for our sins. But more than that: he has broken the power of death by submitting to death and then being raised by the Father, thus passing through and bursting out the other side of death. Jesus now is unlike us, even though he remains fully human, fully bodily (as evidenced by eating a meal with the disciples, not just on this occasion, but also at other times when they met following the resurrection), but now transformed in glory and immortality, no longer subject to death. He is in fact the conqueror of death, and now has death under his power. So even though we still die, we can die in confidence that we are not submitting to an evil fate, but readying ourselves to become like Jesus, passing through death and out the other side, where we will be raised, made immortal, and no longer able to suffer sickness, pain or sorrow, dying no more.

It has been my experience that many Christians are relatively unaware of the glorious future that awaits them in the promise of the resurrection. We have, unfortunately, succumbed to the influence of Gnosticism, even though it is the opposite of Christian faith, through downplaying the bodiliness of our existence, and the promise that, as we are created by God as fully bodily beings, so we shall remain, as we will be raised from the dead, still bodily beings, but transformed into glorious and immortal, but still human, creatures of God. We do not abandon the body at death and move on to a higher existence, free from the burdens of the flesh, as the Gnostics saw it. Nor is death the end, as the inevitable decay of the body seems to indicate, for death is subject to Christ, and will not hold us in his grip a moment past the call of Christ for the dead to rise.

In the book of Romans we read, “If the spirit of him who raised Christ from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.” The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Life. If we are indwelt by the Spirit of life, how can we succumb permanently to death? For the Spirit inhabits our physical bodily beings, the body is called the temple of the Holy Spirit, which is why we are called to care for it, to treat it with respect, to heal and restore it from its hurts, and to refrain from abusing the body in sexual immorality, abusing drugs, overeating, and perhaps even body piercings and tattoos, to name but a few. Treat the body with respect, for you will be that bodily person you are now for all eternity! But if your bodily being is not functioning as it ought, then

don't despair, for the Scriptures teach us that when we are raised all our hurts, weaknesses, ailments, defects, missing limbs, disabilities of every kind, will all be done away with, and we will be raised as we were meant to be: whole, fully functioning, fully bodily creatures of God, created to live and not to die, but having been doomed to death, redeemed from that and made immortal through the power of God through the Spirit of Life within us.

But even just a general acceptance of the resurrection of the dead is not enough, although it is certainly a start. For both observant Jews and Moslems also accept that there will be a resurrection of the dead at the end of time. Christians, however, believe something more significant than that. We do not simply believe that there will be a resurrection of the dead some day: we believe that the resurrection has already begun! There is no distinction, except in time and significance, between the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection to immortality of all the believers. As he was raised, so we shall also be raised, as we read from Romans. If the same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead dwells in you, then how can that Spirit not also raise you from the dead? The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of life, as we confess in the Creeds: "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life." For Jews and Moslems, the resurrection is something that is yet to happen; for Christians, the resurrection is something that has already begun: Jesus is the first-fruits, the beginning of the harvest, the first-born of many brothers; we are the rest of the harvest, the brothers born after him as members of the same family. As the Scripture says, "Blessed and holy is he who has a part in the first resurrection." This has been generally read to refer to the first of two resurrections which will happen at the end of the age, the second resurrection being that of the unbelievers to face punishment, not to share immortality. But I believe this is mistaken: the first resurrection is the resurrection of Jesus, and the blessing is for those who have a share in his resurrection, through faith in this life, and in fulfilment at his return. The resurrection has begun with Jesus, it will continue with us. So if Jesus has not been raised, then neither will we be, for his resurrection is the start of the process which will begin with us.

Death is not the end; death is not release from the body. Death is punishment for sin, and a transition through which we must pass until the day dawns when all those who have placed their trust in God are raised to immortality and glory forever. As Christ

was raised, and shared in a meal with his disciples that first Easter, so we too will be raised, to share the marriage feast of the lamb with him in the kingdom to come. And this is one of the reasons why we celebrate the Lord's Supper as a community of his people: when we eat and drink together in that way, we remember the Lord's death until he comes. How does that work? Simply, that the broken bread and the cup imparts to us the reality of his dead body and shed blood, but also anticipates the time when we shall eat and drink with him in the kingdom. And why a meal? One reason is surely to remind us that our faith is focused on the redemption of real physical bodily beings who eat and drink, and through this very physical act, in which we experience the love of God and the power of the Holy Spirit at work in and through all of us, we are reminded of our physical brokenness, our sin which has led to the shedding of his blood, and the body which will share with Christ in both death and resurrection.

Therefore, brothers and sisters in the Lord, though we all shall die, yet we shall all live, and pass through death to share in the glorious resurrection of Christ, so that as he now is, so we too shall also be, being made like him and transformed in glory and immortality. Since then we have such a hope before us, let us face the future, whatever befalls us, knowing that as we trust in him, so that trust shall be vindicated through the redeeming love of God, who allows none of his people to fall from his hand. Nor should we grieve, as those who have no hope, for those who have already died. For they will not be lost - the Lord himself will come from heaven with a loud command, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet call of God. The dead in Christ shall rise first, and we who are still alive will also be transformed, like them, to be like Christ. And so we shall be with the Lord forever. Therefore, encourage each other with these words. Amen.