

# A Fresh Look at the Roots of Christian Faith

Dr. K.C. Abraham\*

The transformative nature of Jesus' mission is clearly brought out by recent studies of the gospels. They have described Jesus' style of mission using an attractive concept "commensality" which is borrowed from anthropological studies. John Dominic Crossan in his book *'Jesus a Revolutionary Biography'* (Harper: San Francisco) gives a definition of this term. "The word commensality is from *mensa*, the Latin word for "table". It means the rules of tabling and eating as miniature models for rules of association and socialisation. It means table-fellowship as a map of economic determination, social hierarchy, and political differentiation." (p.65) He has quoted some of the anthropologists who in their studies brought out the fact that the table-fellowship mirrors the social structure. "In all societies, both simple and complex, eating is the primary way of initiating and maintaining human relationships. To know what, where, how, when and with whom people eat is to know the character of their society" or eating is a behaviour which symbolises feelings and relationships, mediates social status and power and expresses the boundaries of group identity." (p.69) This is true about our society where inter-dining is not possible between one caste and another, dietary rules distinguish one caste from other. In other words the eating pattern is reflective of social differentiation.

In this situation Jesus advocated open commensality, eating without the usual hierarchal pattern, as a radical departure from the prevailing norm. It is an egalitarian commensality, eating together and living together without any distinctions. It is a powerful symbol – a social and cultural critique challenging the hierarchal and status-based principles of the existing society. Jesus perhaps knew the futility of taking arms against the Roman government. But he realised the effectiveness of changing the cultural symbols that shape the norms of society.

Egalitarianism is also expressed through his healing. The cure has to be normally administered by cultural authorities who have the magical power - often ritually legitimised. Jesus' free healing challenged such authorities. Social ostracism of those with illness like leprosy (skin diseases) was practised and Jesus' act of restoring them by 'touching' is an act again of challenging the 'boundary patterns' of the given society.

Another radical consequence of open commensality is a direct and unmediated contact with God. "The Kingdom of God is a community of radical or un-brokered equality in which individuals are in direct contact with one another and with God, unmediated by any established brokers or fixed locations" (p101). In other words, radical equalitarianism symbolised in free healing, common eating and unmediated and broker-less Kingdom of God are three elements that constitute Jesus' radical style. About the last one, it is said "He (Jesus) was neither a broker nor mediator but somewhat paradoxically, the announcer that neither should exist between humanity and divinity or between humanity and itself. Miracle and parable, healing and eating were calculated to force individuals into unmediated physical and spiritual contact with God and unmediated physical and spiritual contact with one another." (Crossan p.198) How can we live out this radical heritage in our situation of caste hierarchy, religious intolerance and economic injustice? We need symbolic, critical and regenerative acts that challenge the patterns of authority and point to a radical equalitarianism and unmediated God's Kingdom.

The other aspect of his strength was his language, used in his pointed stories that had a message that called people to change their lives. Today our language, co-opted by the market economy and technological rationality that cannot create a humane world, has lost the transforming power of Jesus' language.

The early communities of faith, it seems to me, had to come to terms with the radical message of Jesus in three areas: **Communion, Community and Communication**. In all these crucial areas of ministry and mission we still have to face the challenge of open commensality, radical equalitarianism, unmediated presence of God and the transforming power of Jesus language.

**Communion:** The presence of God was earlier mediated either through a place or a locale – the temple and synagogue. The early church has to come to terms with the radical nature of Jesus' message about the unmediated broker-less presence of God. But alas! The original message is distorted. In a penetrating analysis the Indian theologian S. Kappen notes that "The alienation of Christian faith and practice from the historical Jesus took place along three principal lines – cultic, dogmatic and instituted." (*Jesus and Society*, ISPCCK, Delhi, p.142). Cultic alienation was first to set in. A cult was developed and around it, the priest craft and institutional edifice is built up. "It has removed him (Jesus) from the common run of everyday life, and installed him in the tabernacle. It built a separate home for him furnished with flowers, candles, holy water, incense and the like". He bemoans the fact, "a non-cultic prophetic movement ended up as cultic religion".

Moreover, the presence of God is celebrated the first day of the week, the day of resurrection, by breaking the bread together. The brokenness of God was the basis of their celebration. The presence of God in God's brokenness has a special meaning for them. It was not a presence of might and power, of towering institutions and fortresses; it was of the lowly and vulnerable. In solidarity with the broken of this world can we celebrate God's presence? But it is not an esoteric pursuit or experience, but communion in concretely expressed relationships.

The **community** experience is often described as fellowship. Unfortunately fellowship means a gathering that gives emotional support – we have soul stirring singing and testimony. Emotionalism is not bad, but we need to learn from the community experience of the early Church. "All who believed were together, they had all things in common", a community with a deep sense of responsibility to the other is also about material solidarity. The question of the nature of community that we seek has become crucial today.

Emmanuel Levinas, the Jewish philosopher in our time, helps us to see significance of others for our life. He says that being is being-in-relationship. To be oneself is to be for others.

The scriptural insights are particularly relevant. In Deuteronomy we are commanded to love orphans, widows and strangers (Deut. 10:17-19). In Exodus 23:9 – "Love the stranger in your midst...for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." The stranger is the one whom we tend to exclude.

We need to discover Christianity as a religion of otherness; embracing the stranger who could be the marginal, both economically and also as one from another faith. Narrow exclusivism is sin.

**Communication:** We are today in the age of communication. The marvel of mass communication, the e-mail, satellite communication, fast travel, and all these have brought the world seemingly together. Yes, we should take advantage of these discoveries, but sometimes we confuse information with communication. Our dependence on technology is such that we forget the human relationships that are vitally necessary for a world of unity.

Face to face communication happens when we trust the other, the stranger. When we eat together and celebrate God's faithfulness and mercy. We long for the day when the young and old, the able and disabled, the rich and the poor, men and women, sit around and respect each other, live for each other, feed each other and together praise God.

*\* Dr K.C. Abraham is a well-known Christian theologian from India. He was formerly the president of The Ecumenical Coalition of Third World Theologian. He was also the Director of the South Asia Theological Research Institute (SATHRI), Bangalore, India.*