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# **A Theology of Feasting: Encountering the Kingdom of God**

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## **Abstract**

Central to a theology of feasting is the nearness and newness of the Kingdom of God. Engaging Levinas' philosophy, this article develops a theology of feasting to portray the intimacy of encountering the risen Christ's word of goodness, mercy and joy in the poor one's face. Such intimacy relates the joy of being children of God, seeking to know the Father's forgiveness and prophetic call not to forget 'the least of these who are members of my family' (Mat 25:40), namely, "the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" (Lk 14:3), chosen by God to feast in the Kingdom of God. In the small goodness of being-for-the-other, especially for those on the margins of society, a theology of feasting signifies the hope for Parousia and the resounding of a theological and creative imagination of faith.

## **Keywords**

Children of God, eschatology, feasting, Kingdom of God, Levinas, Parousia

Feasting, in all its hospitality and intimacy, entails a joyful and hopeful outpouring of sharing and celebrating. In the abundance of joy and hope amidst the sufferings of life, feasting celebrates what is so central to human life, namely compassion, goodness and love. Guiding the concept of feasting into a theological domain offers an opportunity to pursue the meaning of Jesus' proclamation of the nearness and newness of the Kingdom of God. Relating the sense of the 'salvation of selves' to 'being called to the feast of the Kingdom of God,' David

Ford has found a way to communicate ‘the themes of joy and responsibility’ in feasting.<sup>1</sup> To this end he uses a variety of lenses to bring out the sense of feasting: ‘the joy of the saints’, aesthetics, ethics, metaphysics, hermeneutics, spirituality, art and poetry.<sup>2</sup> Outlining ‘The spirituality of feasting’, for example, Ford presents a central theme of his book: ‘For this study, Christian vocation can be summed up as being called to the feast of the Kingdom of God’.<sup>3</sup> Moreover applying the self’s Christian vocation theologically, Ford relates that, ‘Salvation seen through the figure of feasting suggests an eschatology of selfhood’.<sup>4</sup> A key thread throughout his study has also been the presence of Emmanuel Levinas’ philosophy, which adds a more pertinent, piercing and radical engagement with theology, emphasising, for instance, the danger of ‘totality’<sup>5</sup> contaminating theology.

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<sup>1</sup> David Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 272.

<sup>2</sup> These themes are found in Chapter 11 (the final chapter) of Ford’s book entitled, “Feasting”. See Ford, *Self and Salvation*, 266-281.

<sup>3</sup> Ford, *Self and Salvation*, 280.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 271. Utilising Levinas’ point about the danger of totality of being in theology in relation to developing a ‘metaphysics of feasting,’ Ford states that ‘... the feast can enact the union of substitutionary joy in the joy of others with substitutionary responsibility’. Hence, in a metaphysics of feasting, the feast enacts the joy of compassion for the other, and becomes a safeguard against egoistical, impersonal, and self-interested ways of being.

Ford's inspiring and creative articulation of feasting, testifying 'to the abundant generosity of God,'<sup>6</sup> has provided an impetus to further develop a theology of feasting in the hope of encountering the Kingdom of God. Guiding the threads of this paper's theology of feasting, Levinas' philosophy will also be pressed into service. Ford himself had set out to apply 'the form of an appropriation of and dialogue with the thought of Emmanuel Levinas,'<sup>7</sup> as a means to find a number of practical contexts which ultimately go beyond the boundaries of Levinas, particularly in the concept of feasting. Nonetheless, engaging Levinas for the benefit of Christian theology will ultimately be one that asks Christian theology to deepen its sense of ethics as 'both first philosophy and first theology',<sup>8</sup> that is to say, to continue the dialogical

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>7</sup> Ford, *Self and Salvation*, 30.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Purcell, *Levinas and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 156. By developing the language of alterity and transcendence, Levinas' philosophy underlines the sense that 'ethics is an optics' or, in speaking of the 'ethical' or 'structure of exteriority', Levinas asserts, 'Morality is not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy'. We can suggest that Levinas' sense of 'ethics as philosophy' signifies the ethical transcendence of the Infinite, God, putting the conscience into question to be responsible for the other. See Seán Hand (ed.), 'Introduction' in *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 5. Levinas will also go as far to characterise such ethical transcendence in terms of holiness and even as ethics as first theology: 'Holiness thus shows itself as an irreducible possibility of the human and God: being called by man. An original ethical event which would also be first theology. Thus ethics ... is the original awakening of an I responsible for the other ...'. See Jill Robbins (ed.), 'The Awakening of the I' in *Is It*

tradition of bringing philosophy and theology together,<sup>9</sup> and hence, for the aim of the article, to situate a theology of feasting on the horizon of ‘ethical metaphysics’; to responsibility for the other, the poor one, whose face unveils the word of God and puts our conscience into question.

Levinasian scholars, such as Edith Wyschogrod and Jeffrey Bloechel,<sup>10</sup> have characterised Levinas’ philosophy as ‘ethical metaphysics’. According to Wyschogrod, ‘The prime objective of Levinas’ work has been to develop a metaphysics upon ethical foundations by showing man’s being in the world to be moral being’.<sup>11</sup> In fact, according to Bloechel, Levinas brings both terms, ethics and metaphysics, together in *Totality and Infinity* as means to give ethics/metaphysics precedence over ontology.<sup>12</sup> In the following quote, Levinas infers that the relation with the other is defined more by intersubjectivity rather than the objectivity of knowledge and its underlying ontological state of egoistical freedom that removes oneself from the other’s freedom (‘the strangeness of the Other’). Levinas writes:

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*Righteous To Be: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 182.

<sup>9</sup> Purcell, *Levinas and Theology*, 156.

<sup>10</sup> See Edith Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics* (Fordham University Press, 2000), 102-103, 228 and Jeffrey Bloechel, *Liturgy of the Neighbor: Emmanuel Levinas and the Religion of Responsibility* (Pennsylvania PA: Duquesne University Press, 2000), 71, 297-8.

<sup>11</sup> Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 228.

<sup>12</sup> Bloechel, *Liturgy of the Neighbor*, 71.

The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics. Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the other by the same, of the Other by me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the same by the other, that is, as the ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

Later, Levinas' ethical metaphysics, focusing on the inter-human face-to-face relation, will be developed further through the notion of the 'non-phenomenology of the face' which he also characterises, for example, as the 'signification beyond being', or the maternity of God - the gestation of responsibility, of being merciful to our neighbour.<sup>14</sup>

The essay will now draw out the theological concepts of feasting and the Kingdom of God, and then discuss the following five key areas pertinent to a theology of feasting: (i) encountering Jesus' intimate presence; (ii) becoming Children of God; (iii) waiting for Parousia; (iv) fellowship with the poor; and (v) developing a theological imagination of faith. These five areas in themselves portray a tasting of God's word, or a savouring of the risen Christ's presence in the neighbour's face. This is to say, in the other's face and countenance,

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<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh PA: Duquesne University Press, 1996), 43.

<sup>14</sup> See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh PA: Duquesne University Press, 1999), 88-91 and Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, translated by Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 183.

we await to hear and encounter the intimacy of the risen Christ's word inviting us to feast at his table in the Kingdom of God.

### **Feasting and the Kingdom of God**

A theology of feasting represents the fundamental and innate capacity of the human person to seek communion with Christ in the hope of encountering the Kingdom of God. The intimate relation with Christ is central to guiding human existence into a humble and ever open form of faith; a 'boundless self-surrender',<sup>15</sup> as Balthasar suggests. For the more personal faith learns 'such obedient willingness ('I always do what is pleasing to him', Jn 8:29)'<sup>16</sup> from Christ, the more the relational dimension of the Father's kingdom aims to spontaneously surprise everyday consciousness. Jesus himself utilised the image of the feast ('banquet' or 'great dinner') to convey the coming of the Kingdom of God in a radical way (Lk 14:15-24/Mt 22:1-14 and Lk 15:11-24).<sup>17</sup> In the parable of the wedding feast, the invited guests refuse to attend (Mt 22:3; Lk 15:18). On the other hand, feasting at the Lord's table in the Kingdom of Heaven 'is open to the least expected'.<sup>18</sup> We could well imagine that the goodness of inviting the 'the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame' in Luke 14:21 becomes just as significant as the dignity of wearing a white garment at the feast (Matt 22:11-

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<sup>15</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, translated by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics. Volume I: Seeing The Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 191.

<sup>16</sup> Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, Vol. I*, 191.

<sup>17</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 88.

<sup>18</sup> Miguel Pérez Fernández, 'Rabbinic Texts In The Exegesis Of The New Testament,' *The Review Of Rabbinic Judaism* 7 (Jan 2004): 113.



14). A theology of feasting further gives hope for a radical, even shocking, encounter of the Kingdom of God, to be, like the ‘the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame’, willing and spontaneous to accept the invitation to “a great dinner” (Lk 14:16), or like the prodigal son, eager and hopeful to return to his Father’s home as a poor one, a hired hand (Lk 15:19).

Evoking joy, mercy, hope and love, the Kingdom of God comes alive into a fabric of encounters, particularly in the ‘small goodness’<sup>19</sup> of inviting the poor ones ‘in the roads and lanes’ to the wedding feast (Lk 14:15-24). A small goodness can go a long way because it unveils our unique responsibility in the here and now. Roger Burggraeve explains that Levinas’ concept of the ‘small goodness’ implies the very transcendence of all social systems and acts as ‘the lever to lift and shake up the [social] system so that it can become more humane’.<sup>20</sup> From the ‘boundless self-surrender’ to God’s will, we are led towards a ‘humane’ understanding of the meaning of Christ’s ‘covenant-fidelity towards God’<sup>21</sup>: to hear and respond to the silent cries of our neighbour. The more a theology of feasting elicits Christ proclaiming the nearness and newness of the Father’s Kingdom, the more the Spirit might lead us to journey into another’s life with a vigilant and spontaneous small goodness of affection and concern.

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<sup>19</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, ‘The Other, Utopia and Justice’ in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 230.

<sup>20</sup> Roger Burggraeve, ‘Responsible for the Responsibility of the Other,’ *Presencing EPIS: A Scientific Journal of Applied Phenomenology & Psychoanalysis* vol.1 (2013): 21.

<sup>21</sup> Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, Vol. I*, 191.

The surprise of being touched with affection or concern can soon transform into the gentleness of being loved.<sup>22</sup> Here, we take a step towards a horizon of infinite possibilities of ‘the service of love’<sup>23</sup> where the risen Christ becomes the archetypal form of a ‘boundless surrender’ to the good. A theology of feasting is rooted in the small goodness of spontaneous acts of service. The spontaneity of service touches upon the ‘wisdom of love’,<sup>24</sup> a creative vitality of a ‘boundless-surrender’ of faith in God shaped by a vigilant hope to encounter the risen Christ’s word on our neighbour’s face, the poor one whom God has chosen and invited to feast in the Kingdom of God (Lk 14:21). Altogether, a theology of feasting signifies the wisdom and service of love at the table of the Lord.

The wisdom and service of love can begin, like St. Paul, in a beatitude of the ‘meekness and gentleness of Christ’ (2 Cor 10:1) before and for the other. Such humility presents a paschal vision of ‘the eyes of faith’<sup>25</sup> to behold the Gethsemanes of life as a step of perseverance and hope to encounter ‘New Nazareths,’<sup>26</sup> the very words of the risen Christ, being born in us,

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<sup>22</sup> Willard Gaylin, *Feelings: Our Vital Signs* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 170-1.

<sup>23</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 162.

<sup>24</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 162.

<sup>25</sup> Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, Vol. I*, 191.

<sup>26</sup> A phrase from Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem, ‘The Blessed Virgin Mary Compared To The Air We Breathe’. Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, selected with an introduction and notes by W. H. Gardner (Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, 1988), 56. ‘... Of her flesh he took flesh: He does take fresh and fresh, Though much the mystery how, not flesh but spirit now and makes, O marvellous! New Nazareths in us, Where she shall conceive Him, morning, noon, and eve ...’.

proclaiming, 'Feed my lambs ... Tend my sheep ... Do you love me? .... Follow me' (John 21: 15-17, 19). For, 'Nothing is simpler for man than the act of love'.<sup>27</sup> For Christ to be born into our lives inaugurates the moment 'at a deeper level' to know that we 'are seen by God (Jn 1:46ff; 1 Cor 8:3; 13:12; Gal 4:9; Phil 3:12)'.<sup>28</sup> In a theology of feasting, this means taking on the humility and gentleness of being 'face to face' (2 Cor 10:1) with those on the margins of society ('the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame' (Lk 14:21), favoured and chosen to feast at the Lord's table in the kingdom of God.

Gentleness animates humility whilst a small goodness of love orients us towards 'an experience of the eternal':<sup>29</sup> a transforming interpersonal encounter of hearing God's word in the other's face ('the consciousness of having received grace'<sup>30</sup>). Here in this encounter, the service and wisdom of love resounds. Just a small goodness of love is enough for God's word to come to mind in the relation with the other. This is because our relation with others unveils God's true presence, not merely metaphorically, but as a transfiguring and transformative encounter (Matt 25:40) with the risen Christ. By feasting on joy, mercy, hope and love through our relational encounters, God's real presence can be heard.<sup>31</sup> For example, in the

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<sup>27</sup> Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, Vol. I*, 192.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>31</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 'Philosophy, Justice and Love' in *Entre Nous*, 110. Here I am drawing from Levinas' thought where the relation to the other becomes an epiphany of 'a real presence of God'. Levinas writes: 'When I speak to a Christian, I always quote Matthew 25; the relation to God is presented there as a relation to another person. It is not a metaphor: in

face of a refugee, God's cry may be heard: 'Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger.' (Lam 1:12) And further, we could well envisage Christ proclaiming: 'But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed, because you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous' (Lk 14:13-14). The banquet then becomes a place of epiphany 'of coming face to face with the beautiful in distilled form'.<sup>32</sup> 'The really beautiful [the risen Christ's word] shines [comes to mind] from the place where the real has itself acquired form [the other's face], where seductive opposition between illusion and disillusion [self-care] has been transcended'.<sup>33</sup> Hence, the hospitality and intimacy of sharing a meal together underscores the real ('the really beautiful') presence of Jesus in the service of love, proclaiming the Father's blessing to those on the margins of society: 'I will look with favour upon you and make you fruitful and multiply you; and I will maintain my covenant with you' (Lev 26:9).<sup>34</sup>

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the other, there is a real presence of God. In my relation to the other, I hear the Word of God. It is not a metaphor; it is not only extremely important, it is literally true. I'm not saying that the other is God, but that in his or her Face I hear the Word of God'.

<sup>32</sup> Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, Vol. I*, 239.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Fernández, 'Rabbinic Texts In The Exegesis Of The New Testament,' 114-116. Fernández compares a parallel Rabbinic parable to Matt 20:1-16, the parable of the workers in the vineyard. The Rabbinic parable on God's election of Israel as the chosen people is a Tannaitic exegesis of Lev 26:15, giving a sense that God proclaiming 'I will be always with you'. The parallel Rabbinic parable offers a fecund background into the possibility of seeing that those on the margins of society are Jesus' 'chosen' people, that is to say, that the poor

To feast then signifies a spiritual poverty (Mt 5:3) and ethical awakening (Mt 5: 7-8) of the service and wisdom of love, namely to hear God's word in the other's face (Mt 25:40); to encounter the risen Christ. By feasting on God's word initiated through exposure to the other's face and suffering, we learn though time to possess a heightened or inspired degree of listening, hearing, tasting, touching and feeling – 'to recognise the Son as the form of God'<sup>35</sup> in the other's face. Our senses then learn to become diachronically sensitive to uncovering the beautiful, real presence of God in the other's face: 'the whole Christ, through the Holy Spirit'. The act of feasting on God's word portrays the phenomenon of the other's face as the opportunity to initiate what is so central to a life of hospitality, intimacy, joy, mercy, hope and love, namely 'transformation into 'the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18)'.<sup>36</sup>

Feasting invites communion and hope to encounter the glory to come. Feasting further is hope for Parousia, for encountering the Kingdom of God, and sharing the risen Christ's table with the poor one. Feasting is also at once seeking the unadulterated beauty and ancient vintage of listening to God's presence in Eden, and being with Christ in the Garden of Olives. All this is not to presume that feasting is God, but that feasting on God's word underlines a relation of being-for-the-other wherein we taste the joy, mercy, hope and love of the life of Christ. Moreover, feasting is the very creative element of the human spirit as it awaits

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have a very special place in the Kingdom of God in world bent on oppression and exploitation.

<sup>35</sup> Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, Vol. I*, 240.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

Parousia and the Kingdom of God. Hence, feasting comes alive as the spiritual imagination takes form ‘in the heart of human wholeness’<sup>37</sup> for example through prayer, poetry, writing, storytelling, art and music. All these gifts ‘appear rooted in the unity’ of Christ’s substantial form of ‘indivisible truth’.<sup>38</sup> Now let us move forward to engage the first key area of a theology of feasting.

### **Encountering Jesus’ Intimate Presence**

The intimacy of encountering Jesus’ presence in the other’s face translates as a command or even, ordination,<sup>39</sup> of responsibility for the other. As God’s word and grace invites us to savour a little goodness of mercy, we learn that freedom remains particularly difficult to give oneself up for the other. This is because that freedom is a responsibility demanding sacrifice and compassion, and moreover, another difficulty, an adoration<sup>40</sup> of the other’s fears, outrage, poverty, needs and loneliness.

If feasting is about an ‘abundance of food and drink’ as much as ‘invitation,’ and ‘celebration and rejoicing,’<sup>41</sup> then it has everything to do with the nearness (Matt 4:17, 10:7) and newness (Matt 9:17; Jn 3:3) of the Kingdom of God. One can be sure that the Father’s Kingdom is

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 242-3.

<sup>39</sup> Levinas, ‘Philosophy, Justice and Love,’ 111.

<sup>40</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Loving the Torah More than God’ in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, translated by Seán Hand (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 145.

<sup>41</sup> McGrath, *Christian Spirituality*, 89.

going to surprise and shock us with an invitation and feast of love, especially as one brings a repentant heart of faith (cf. Luke 15: 11-32) to the table of the Lord (1 Cor 10:21). Whenever we go out for an invitation, naturally we desire to encounter something new, surprising, entertaining or even creative. We do not wish to receive a patchwork, as it were, of coolness and leftovers, but to enter into a 'worthy' house (Matt 10:13) overflowing with fellowship and generosity. In the parable of the prodigal son, even the younger son could taste a trace of the Father's overflowing goodness and hospitality when recollecting, 'How many of my Father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare ...'. (Lk 15:17). It is not merely impulsive that the 'unworthy' son returned to his Father's 'worthy' house; the son knew his Father's home was a place of 'superabundance'<sup>42</sup> to salve his 'emptiness, humiliation and defeat'.<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps our own story of journeying to the Lord's table in the Father's Kingdom will neither be too different from the prodigal son's situation nor even from that of the paralysed man in the Synoptic Gospels (cf. Matt 9:2-8; Mk 2:1-12; Lk 5:17-26), whom Jesus forgives as a means of inviting healing. In this latter narrative, Jesus asks the scribes, 'For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'?' (Matt 9:5) We find a rattling insight into encountering Jesus' intimate presence. He does something shocking and surprising to reveal that his Father's love not only heals the outer self (paralysis), but also the inner self (paralysis of the spirit) through forgiveness. So also the younger (prodigal) son encounters the compassionate, rattling love of the father who forgives his squandering of

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<sup>42</sup> Ford, *Self and Salvation*, 271.

<sup>43</sup> Henri J. M. Houwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (DLT: London, 1994), 46.

wealth and ‘dissolute living’ (Lk 15:13). We can learn from these two biblical stories that the revelation of Kingdom of God works in a way to shatter our everyday consciousness about personal intimacy. The Kingdom is not about pursuing pleasures; it is otherwise for it is the realm of Jesus’ and our Father in heaven. Personal intimacy feasts, as it were, on God’s forgiveness, compassion and healing. Moreover, personal intimacy is a springboard for a newness and proximity of joy to come to mind and recharge the spirit.

Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom of God gives a straightforward insight into the importance of joy of personal intimacy. What makes the Kingdom of God new or near is simply Jesus’ presence and ministry (Lk 4:43). Both healing and mercy underline Jesus’ personal character of forging intimate relations as he raises up the lost and broken, to ‘Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons’ (Matt 10:8). Such intimacy, evoking real surprise and wonder, becomes an archetypal form of small goodness to guide the way we relate with others. So when a host invites a guest to share a meal, an opportunity of intimacy awaits to surprise and create something new. The feeling of surprise, of being touched in one’s heart during the meal can lead to deeply felt expressions. Such growing fellowship offers the possibility for the miracle of friendship to emerge as the creation of new hopes, or the cleansing of a heart of wounds through sharing stories and narratives of life. The hearts of the host and guest become near to one another inasmuch as their fellowship together inspires and orients the intimacy of friendship towards a new horizon of goodness and joy, turning daily anxieties into thanksgiving and fears into promises of solicitude for one another. Here, we can come close to the sense of the Kingdom of God which Jerome Dollard



articulates: ‘The kingdom of God is fully personal, that is, touching the individual person in his or her depths and in the same moment radically affecting all relationships’.<sup>44</sup>

### **Becoming Children of God**

A good meal can go a long way. A feast could perhaps initiate a radical change, a growth of understanding or perhaps an encounter of transcendence. The Kingdom of God invites such ‘feasting’ of conversion and transcendence. Dollard reflects, ‘It seems to me the Kingdom of God in Christ Jesus calls us as individuals to *koinonia*, *liturgeia*, and *diakonia*; community, worship, and service. Our continuing personal conversion to Christ Jesus is a letting of the bondage of self which frees us to become children of God’.<sup>45</sup> If feasting in the Kingdom of God can initiate the formation of a sense of community, worship and service, then such sensibility of feasting marks out an encounter with the joy of the risen Christ.<sup>46</sup> The joy is expressed as the blessing of being a child of God; a gift and openness that is but ‘one menu’<sup>47</sup> of personal intimacy with God through the risen Christ. Reading the ‘menu,’ as it were, unveils a key trait of a theology of feasting: knowing what it means to become the children of God. The first epistle of John provides some insight: ‘I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven on account of his name. ... I write to you, children, because you know the Father’ (1 Jn 2: 12, 14).

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<sup>44</sup> Jerome R. Dollard, ‘Eschatology: a Roman Catholic perspective,’ *Review & Expositor* 79:2 (March 1982): 369.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ford, *Self and Salvation*, 272.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

Through John's words, we begin to imagine what it means 'to become children of God'. Though we are called to believe that our sins are forgiven through the name of Jesus Christ, until we have partaken of such mercy or entered into the Kingdom of God, we do not know the Father. A theology of feasting in the Kingdom of God encourages an intimate exposure to the mercy and loving-kindness of Christ. If we believe then that Jesus is the way and archetype for mercy and loving-kindness, then something of his death and resurrection must work in us through the Spirit to convert and transform our hearts and minds into knowing the Father. Here we begin to appreciate in a theology of feasting that God the Creator is one with God the Redeemer.<sup>48</sup>

As a child of God finds meaning in the death and resurrection of Christ, the work of the Father's Creation touches the child with an Edenic nakedness of humility before the infinite mystery. Yet, the work and mystery of God continues. If Creator and Redeemer are one, the mystery of Creation and the Paschal Mystery come together in the deepest reaches of the human soul. This is because the child of God has sought conversion and transformation into the life of God. The child of God then, to draw an analogy, is led to both the Garden of Eden and the Garden Gethsemane. In the Garden of Eden, the child of God discovers his/her nature and image (Gen 1:26), of how he/she has been formed 'from the dust of the ground' (Gen 2:7) to return again to the 'ground' (Matt 26:39) to pray at the Garden of Gethsemane. Journeying from Eden to Gethsemane, as it were, becomes the pathway of joy, humility and

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<sup>48</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), translated by Brian McNeil, *The God of Jesus Christ: Meditations on the Triune God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 42.

Ratzinger writes: 'For Christian faith in the creation, it is decisively important that the Creator and Redeemer, the God of the origin and the God of the end, be one and the same'.

discipleship - to rejoice in being made in the likeness and image of God, to humbly listen to the risen Christ's word even unto death, and discover the new life of being a disciple ('follow me' (Jn 21:19)).

To be a child of God, to be a disciple of Jesus (Jn 21:5), is the very hope of feasting at Christ's table in the Father's kingdom where, so to speak, the gardens of Eden and Gethsemane, of grapes and olives, unveil a time for beauty, joy and abundant blessings. Our eyes may then perhaps begin to open and encounter this future world where we have, like 'little children' (1 Jn 2: 12, 14), found and known God's forgiveness through Christ, and learnt to grow in strength to avoid and conquer evil (1 Jn 2:13-14) so that we may encounter the infinite, triune nature of God, that from 'the beginning' (1 Jn 2:13-14) 'our Father in heaven' is always sharing with his Son (Jn 1:1) who breathes the Spirit of forgiveness and sense of discipleship, otherness and mission upon us (John 20:22-23).

### **Waiting for Parousia**

A theology of feasting takes to heart the letter of St. James (2:5): 'Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?' By inviting hospitality and intimacy with the poor, we learn how it means to wait for Parousia: to become children of God, knowing know the Father (1 Jn 2: 12, 14). Such knowledge translates into moments of intimate contemplation and loving-kindness. These sacred moments unveil a surprising or even shocking revelation of the other's need: to be invited to sit beside us at the Lord's table in the Father's Kingdom. In other words, to feast on the risen Christ's word in the other's face is, 'as children of God' (Gal 3:26), to discover and encounter the poor one's face of hungering and thirsting 'for righteousness' (Matt 5:6).

The idea of Parousia, of Christ's return, can certainly be an enigmatic one demanding patience (Jas 5:7-8). However, such patience is nurtured by becoming children of God: 'And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming' (1 Jn 2:28). A theology of feasting then, taking up the ideal of becoming children of God (seeking to know the Father's forgiveness), 'becomes a time of Advent'<sup>49</sup> and hope of 'being gathered together' (1 Thess 2:1) with the risen Christ. Such hope is nurtured further by listening to the Father's prophetic word: 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' (Mat 25:40). To be then, '[p]ossessed and inspired by the Spirit of Jesus himself,'<sup>50</sup> is to take up what is at the heart of feasting and being a child of God, namely to inherently realise that relating to God and relating to the poor one are one and the same.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the other's poverty and hunger help to signify that 'the only absolute value is the human possibility of giving the other priority over oneself'.<sup>52</sup> Levinas' idea of the height of responsibility, of giving the other priority over the self speaks of gentleness, and provides a way to hope for Parousia. Such gentleness invites a 'dialogue of transcendence' or an 'ethical asymmetry' where one proceeds with the utmost caution and care to the point of becoming

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<sup>49</sup> Anthony Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 181.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>51</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 'Philosophy, Justice and Love,' 110.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

hesitant and fearful not to do injustice to the poor one.<sup>53</sup> The means then towards engaging the other begins with the gentleness and sensitivity of hesitation rather than ‘self-confident enthusiasm’.<sup>54</sup>

The exposure to the Kingdom initiates a response or vocation of responsibility, to learn from Christ, not just to be stupid sheep, but shepherds. Here we learn to care for the staff of Christ. Yet, this may not be so easy to imagine as Gerard Manley Hopkins lamented in his poem, *God’s Grandeur*, ‘Why do men then now not reckon his rod?’<sup>55</sup> We can wonder here for a moment with Hopkins why we may lack courage to take hold of the Shepherd’s staff to walk the difficult paths of responsibility, mercy and forgiveness. In spite of human reticence, indolence or fatigue, the beauty of ‘God’s Grandeur’ shows that there is more to our ‘bent world’ ‘seared with trade’.<sup>56</sup> A future world awaits where we may envisage ‘what no eye has seen’ (1 Cor 2:9) wherein the ‘Holy Ghost ... broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings’.<sup>57</sup> Holding the Shepherd’s staff, listening to the word of the risen Christ, we could imagine with Hopkins by our side that the entrance to the Garden of Eden - ‘charged with the grandeur of God’ - is not but too far away. The Garden of Eden, entrance to Eden itself, symbolises hope to enter into the Kingdom of God, awaiting for Parousia.

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<sup>53</sup> Roger Burggraeve, ‘Dialogue of Transcendence: A Levinasian Perspective on the Anthropological-Ethical Conditions for Interreligious Dialogue,’ *Journal of Communication and Religion* 37:1 (Spring 2014): 13.

<sup>54</sup> Burggraeve, ‘Dialogue of Transcendence,’ 23.

<sup>55</sup> Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, 27.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

Genesis located the entrance of Eden in the east (Gen 3:24) and Hopkins tells us that the westward setting sun will eventually give way to morning ‘at the brown brink eastward’.<sup>58</sup> So then might not the radiance of the rising ‘sun of righteousness’ (Mal 4:2) – the risen Christ – through death and resurrection reveal the very entrance to Eden? Or the Holy Spirit too, brooding in care and concern, extending a warm breast of compassion and fluttering bright wings of peace, penance and grace, unveil Eden’s eastward entrance? Paradise or heaven is linked by ‘both modern scholars and the church fathers’<sup>59</sup> with the Garden of Eden. Through Christ’s death and resurrection and Pentecost, we could envisage, borrowing some of Hopkins’ poetic inspiration, that the beauty of ‘God’s Grandeur’ signifies not only a foretaste of the paradise of Eden, but also the hope for Parousia and the Kingdom of God. So amidst the imprint of divine grandeur upon the world, a theology of feasting begins to take form as the very hope of waiting for Parousia.

Given that we are made for union with God rather than ‘spiritual death,’<sup>60</sup> the morning, eastward light of the risen Christ unveils a joyful horizon of hope to let the brooding Holy Spirit transform our lives with the ‘dearest freshness deep down things’.<sup>61</sup> Locating the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Christopher A Hall, ‘Christ’s Kingdom and Paradise,’ *Christianity Today* 47:11 (November 2003): 79.

<sup>60</sup> John Coe, ‘Musings on the Dark Night of the Soul: Insights from St. John of the Cross on a Developmental Spirituality,’ *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 28:4 (Dec, 2000): 296.

<sup>61</sup> Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, 27.

‘dearest freshness’, to call all creatures (like St. Francis) my ‘brother’ and my ‘sister’,<sup>62</sup> bespeaks of an invitation awaiting to feast at the table of the Lord in the Kingdom of God in the time of Parousia. A theology of feasting is then inherently eschatological. This is because it invites the virtue of hope to guide our lives during a ‘metaxic’ and ‘turbulent’ time of living between Christ’s Resurrection and return (Parousia).<sup>63</sup> To this end, a theology of feasting must draw from the imagination of faith, and set out to envision the Good Shepherd’s menu, a course of salvation as it were: an entrée of sharing joy with the risen Christ, a main of walking with God in ‘the garden of the Lord’ (Isa. 51:3), and a dessert of divine union through the Spirit. Such feasting becomes the spiritual nutrition and energy to animate the perseverance of waiting for Parousia into the desire to share in ‘God’s Grandeur’ of creation and the work of salvation for the world.

However, the wait for Parousia can be marked by doubt. And in the face of suffering, there can even be a breakdown of eschatology, or a rejection of the promise of ‘consolations’<sup>64</sup> in heaven. Even Emmanuel Levinas himself takes on a more radical reaction to a traditional reading of eschatology and messianism, stating: ‘Is one loyal to the Torah because one counts on the promise?’ Must I not remain faithful to its teachings, even if there is no promise? ... Judaism is valid not because of the ‘happy end’ of its history, but because of the faithfulness

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<sup>62</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, n. 11.

<sup>63</sup> Anthony J. Kelly, *The Resurrection Effect: Transforming Christian Life and Thought* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 80.

<sup>64</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, translated by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh PA: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 118.

of this history to the teaching of the Torah'.<sup>65</sup> What then makes Levinas to take up the radical step and opt for a religion without 'consolations', that is to say, without remuneration or compensation of heaven for our ethical engagement? For Levinas, the 'Passion'<sup>66</sup> of the Shoah introduced a profound crisis of the promise. The pain of suffering can interrupt and subdue the time of the promise: 'Time, in the world, dries all tears; it is the forgetting of the unforgiven instant and the pain for which nothing can compensate'.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 'Dialogue on Thinking-of-the-Other' in *Entre Nous*, 206.

<sup>66</sup> It is interesting to note that Levinas will at times use Christian theological terms like 'Passion' to speak of the Shoah, and 'Resurrection' to refer to the birth of the State of Israel. In one instance, he will engage Jn 19:30 ('It is finished') to highlight 'the Passion' of Nazi persecution. Even before Levinas, Franz Rosenzweig, in his book entitled *The Star of Redemption*, had set out to relate religious truth through both Christianity and Judaism. Acknowledging Rosenzweig (whose writings have made an enduring influence upon Levinas' corpus of writings), Levinas affirms the value of Jews and Christians coming together in search for truth: 'Truth is consequently experienced in a dialogue between Jew and Christian. It does not reach a conclusion, but constitutes the very life of truth'. Following Levinas and Rosenzweig, then, this article seeks, through the dialogue of Levinas' philosophy with Christian theology, to journey towards theological truth. See Levinas, 'Jewish Thought Today' and 'Space is not One-Dimensional' in *Difficult Freedom*, 163 and 263 and Levinas, 'Dialogue on Thinking-of-the-Other' in *Entre-Nous*, 206.

<sup>67</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), 90.



Levinas' position on eschatology parallels his view on theodicy. For example in his essay entitled, 'Useless Suffering,' he points out, 'The disproportion between suffering and very theodicy was shown at Auschwitz with a glaring, obvious clarity'.<sup>68</sup> Later he refers to Emil Fackenheim stating, 'According to the philosopher we have just quoted, Auschwitz would practically entail a revelation from the very God who nevertheless was silent at Auschwitz: a commandment to faithfulness'.<sup>69</sup> So what might be deduced here in Levinas is a trace of eschatology 'that demands even more resources of the *I* in each of us'.<sup>70</sup> Hence, compassion for the other should be our focus as we journey towards the Kingdom of God. The reason why we behave responsibly is before us – the other. Here, we too discover a trace of the world to come, and this is feasting at the Lord's table with those who are ready to enter the Lord's great dinner - 'the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame' (Lk 14:21). In the trace of *illegitimacy*, the 'he [that one] in the depth of the you', we have to think that the Parousia through the Spirit is with us; we discover more deeply through the trace of otherness in disinterestedness that we are an 'other' or 'poor one', and moreover that the risen Christ (who brings the world to come for us) is speaking to us, inviting us to his table.

Like the Gospels' silence over Holy Saturday, Christ's overwhelming pain at Gethsemane becomes a necessary silence or caveat or even prohibition to speak for example about heaven without a 'desire for the Good'<sup>71</sup> - the transcendence and small goodness of being-for-the-other. We see that for Christ at Gethsemane, a passion of faithfulness is enough; it is a

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<sup>68</sup> Levinas, 'Useless Suffering' in *Entre Nous*, 97.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

‘trauma that could not be assumed,’<sup>72</sup> that is to say represented in consciousness. Christ’s passion can only make sense through the sacrifice of the Cross, the responsibility par excellence ‘for us’ (1 John 3:16). Indeed, having come from ‘the dust of the ground’ (Gen 2:7), the human person through the suffering and death of Christ returns to the ground (Matt 26:39). Suffering marks out a journey to return to the ground of humility and faithfulness, to the Creator God. The passion of Christ portrays this eschatological journey of faith which finds meaning and articulation in the interhuman and humane order of sacrifice for the other: the very fellowship with the poor.

### **Fellowship with the Poor**

A theology of feasting at the Lord’s table with the poor one translates as a stubborn small goodness or vigilance not to inflict any violence. Encountering the poor one, one’s inner being or soul shivers,<sup>73</sup> as it were, before offering responsibility, so that any import of doing violence might be purged. The shivering soul within initiates ‘the beginning of the wisdom of love’.<sup>74</sup> And carried forth through gentleness, hospitality and hope for intimacy emerge as the very opportunity to share a banquet with the poor one at the Lord’s table. Furthermore, the act of soul-shivering gentleness before the other will give opportunities for mercy and joy to flow into the relation. Here in this interpersonal encounter, a biblical horizon of faith forms as the very hope for Parousia and God’s Kingdom. Or, alternatively, a theology of feasting invites ‘utter cautiousness and carefulness’<sup>75</sup> as much as conversion and openness to the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>73</sup> Burggraeve, ‘Dialogue of Transcendence,’ 23.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 23.

other's need and suffering inasmuch as it fosters transcendence to become children of God, knowing the Father forgives through the Son (Eph 1:7). Such knowing provides the grace of gentleness, allowing the soul to shiver before the poor one and encounter the true presence of God in the goodness of joy, mercy, love and hope for Parousia rather than revenge, humiliation and oppression.

Locating an eschatological tension between immediate expectation and delay of hearing the risen Christ's word, provides an entry point to reflect about hope for Parousia, of Jesus' return. A theology of feasting responds to the tension and mystery of Parousia through seeing a pathway through Eden and Gethsemane towards the Kingdom of God. The pathway itself is the very care and fellowship we give to the poor in our midst. Hence, at the heart of such mission/evangelisation or walking along the path lies the work of giving spiritual care to the poor;<sup>76</sup> a liturgy (work) of difficult freedom unveiling a feast of goodness and joy.

When Jesus the Messiah returns and invites people to his table to feast on the goodness and joyful blessings of God, will it demand a decision on our part (cf. Matt 22:1-14) to care for the least of our brothers and sisters (cf. Matt 25:31-46)? By inviting the poor to the table of the Lord – responding to their cries of hunger and thirst for survival, respect and justice - the wine of the Kingdom of God may truly be served. Where we are confronted by the face – countenance and exposure – of the poor one, the suffering servant, Jesus the Christ, initiates a new beginning, a transfiguration, as it were, of 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him' (1 Cor 2:9; cf. Isa. 64:4).

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<sup>76</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 200.

A theology of feasting emerges as a culmination of ‘joy and responsibility’<sup>77</sup> through fellowship with the poor. The joy of encountering the Christ at the table and the responsibility of vigilance to offer Christ’s friendship with the poor at the Kingdom’s table are one and the same. Here we begin to encounter what it means to walk in ‘the garden of the Lord’ and feast in the Kingdom of God. In the ‘one menu’ of mercy and love, we can imagine also an ‘ancient vintage’ that has been maturing since the days of Creation. This ancient, Edenic wine signifies the future world where there is an end to economic oppression and political violence to the poor. In the Talmud, the Rabbis had a sense of this ancient wine and future world. According to Chapter 11 of *Tractate Sanhedrin* in the Jewish Talmud, in the context of interpreting Isa 64:4 (‘From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him’) there is an ancient vintage of that has been maturing ‘since the six days of creation.’<sup>78</sup> The following is Levinas’ translation:

R. Joshua b. Levi said: To the wine that has been kept [maturing] with its grapes since the six days of Creation. A famous vintage! An ancient wine that has not been bottled, or even harvested. A wine not given the least opportunity to become adulterated. Absolutely unaltered, absolute pure. The future world is this wine.

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<sup>77</sup> Ford, *Self and Salvation*, 272.

<sup>78</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, translated by Seán Hand (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 66.

Let us admire the beauty of the image, but none the less question the meaning it might have.<sup>79</sup>

Rabbi Joshua's reflection here imagines a future world of 'unaltered' and 'original simplicity'<sup>80</sup> through the analogy of something of great value, purity and beauty, namely the grapes of the Garden of Eden. Following the Rabbi's imagination, we could venture forward to apply a Christian analogy to the Garden of Gethsemane. Not only then is there the unaltered, original and ancient wine at the table of the Lord, but also the beautiful and pure olive oil that has been kept maturing since the night of Christ's suffering at Gethsemane. Here, feasting at the table of the Lord, we might proclaim, 'But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the steadfast love of God for ever and ever' (Ps. 52:8) or 'Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table' (Ps. 128:3). The joy of feasting in the house of God, and having fellowship with the risen Christ, with family, friends and the poor becomes also a way to respond to the trauma and unhappiness of our lives as we partake of the gift of salvation. Sharing in the beauty of the grape and olive, dipping the manna of God's loving kindness in the wine of the future world of justice and the olive oil of mercy, we are brought into the countenance of the risen Christ's face to offer the gifts of peace, mercy and joy.

Feasting altogether on the gift of peace, the promise of mercy and the blessings of joy and love, we are led to discover that the Father's Kingdom not only is an the age of unconditional and limitless forgiveness and loving-kindness; it also unveils a future world of what 'the great

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 67.

majority of the poor' signify through their 'special openness to faith'.<sup>81</sup> Where we offer God's 'friendship', 'blessing: and 'word'<sup>82</sup> to the poor, we admit the hope of the world-to-come (*olam haba*) of God's salvation. The Kingdom of God unconceals the mystery of encountering God's transcendence even though our busy and messy, sometimes tormented lives, fall into obscurity and failure (cf. Mk 4:1-9). For in the time of the Father's Kingdom, there will be a time for everything (cf. Eccles 3:1-8). Yet we may wonder, who or what is this 'everything'? Or is it perhaps 'when' - *when* was it that we encountered the risen Christ's word in the poor one's face? (cf. Matt 25:40)

### **Developing a Theological Imagination of Faith**

A theology of feasting on the goodness of the Lord is not complete without allowing the creative imagination of faith to rejoice and resound in the hope for 'a wondrous transformation of the material world'<sup>83</sup> to come – the Kingdom of God. Not only does the creative imagination and its fruitful application provide a foretaste, so to speak, of heaven, but also the coming of the Father's reign at the time of Parousia.<sup>84</sup> The creative spirit and imagination aims to produce a 'new level of embodiment'<sup>85</sup> that gives hope for the Holy

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<sup>81</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, #200.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, 178.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

Spirit to ‘penetrate and refashion the world’<sup>86</sup> with the ‘superabundance’<sup>87</sup> of God’s grace in the risen Christ. Through gifts of the creative human spirit, fostering ‘[c]onstant contemplation of the whole Christ’ in, for example, art, music and poetry, the person of faith is ‘compelled to speak of a Christian ‘attunement’ to or ‘consonance’ with God’.<sup>88</sup> Such ‘attunement’ or ‘consonance’ ‘springs from faith, hope and love’,<sup>89</sup> ‘of being moved and possessed by’<sup>90</sup> the beautiful: the risen Christ’s word in the other’s face. A theology of feasting does not fully unfold without a celebration of the creative talents of the human person that portray a fundamental trait of a theology of feasting, namely, ‘the wisdom of love at the service of love’.<sup>91</sup>

We could well wonder in a theology of feasting, how might the face of the risen Jesus help our hearts to grow? At times, as loneliness and depression or perhaps pretending to love, makes us hostile towards others,<sup>92</sup> we could fall into limiting our friendship and exempt relatives, friends or acquaintances because they are poor, different or very difficult to deal with. Such a choice can be made where fear grips the soul with bitterness and stifles the creative movements of hospitality. As a result, we may through our wounds diminish the gift of grace long awaiting to unfold in relationships. However, such a wounded condition should

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ford, *Self and Salvation*, 271.

<sup>88</sup> Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, Vol. I*, 242.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>91</sup> Levinas, ‘Otherwise than Being,’ 162.

<sup>92</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (Fount: London, 1996), 48-49, 74.

not be the last word. Suffering need not be useless and for nothing.<sup>93</sup> A theology of feasting aims to touch and stir a wounded soul through developing a theological imagination of faith - a creative sense inspiring hope, courage and confidence to face the demands of each day.

We can then infer that under the countenance of risen Christ's face lies a word of hope and encouragement to take on the heart of a poet or musician or artist, to create joy out of pain, and hope from suffering. We can begin to relate that a theology of feasting facilitates the creative, artistic imagination at work, fostered through prayer, hospitality and loving-kindness. So, for example, taking on the creative imagination of an artist's vision, we could paint a scene of the Lord's table in the Kingdom of God and envisage its splendour between two beautiful, pure and unaltered gardens, one of grapes (Eden), and the other of olives (Gethsemane). We may then contemplate how the gardens of Eden and Gethsemane, adorning the Kingdom of God, inspires spiritual practices of faith, adoration and repentance, a joyful song or dance with others, and a heavenly feast. In a theology of feasting, we can envisage that the creative, human spirit reflects an outpouring of love and small goodness from encountering Christ's wounds and words in the other's face.

The hope of feasting at the Lord's table in the Kingdom of God may well reveal a penetrating encounter of the 'divine mystery'.<sup>94</sup> Here, for example, philosophers, theologians, mystics, poets, musicians, artists or storytellers might want to respond with their creative imaginations. Like the Psalmist, they might lead us to the Lord's table as, 'They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with

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<sup>93</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 'Useless Suffering,' 94.

<sup>94</sup> Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, 172.



you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light' (Ps. 36:8-9). Learning from 'great thinkers,'<sup>95</sup> we might envision the 'immeasurable wonder' of the resurrection life of meeting Christ in the Father's kingdom. Walking with mystics, as it were, in 'the garden of the Lord', we can be led to see the 'abundance' of God's 'steadfast love' (Ps. 36:5) even amongst deserts of hopelessness: 'For the Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song' (Isa 51:3). With poets, like Hopkins, we might give praise to the 'pied beauty', 'the dappled things' of God's creation like fallen 'chestnuts' or 'finches' wings'.<sup>96</sup> Whilst artists teach us to be shaped and coloured through bursting cries of inspiration, musicians by example help us to be immersed into the sound of God's delight. And storytellers too soak our imaginations into the river of the Lord's delights, so that we might partake of an unaltered, original and pure wine of love, ever ancient and ever new, timeless. Envisioning such creative encounters of 'divine mystery', Anthony Kelly relates:

*Within* the divine mystery, in communion with the divine persons, the blessed share in the divine life. A variety of sense analogies is applicable here. To be in heaven is to feast on the reality of God, to drink from the source of life. It is to taste the sweetness of the Spirit and inhale its fragrance. It is to plunge into the depths of divine mystery. We will hear the eternal music of the Word and touch

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>96</sup> Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, 30. A reference to Hopkins' poem, 'Pied Beauty': 'Glory be to God for dappled things – For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow; For rose-moles in all stipple upon trout that swim; fresh-firecoal chestnut falls; finches' wings...?'

and embrace what in life could never be grasped. We will move with the energies of divine life and see the perpetual light that shines upon us. Within God, the blessed not only meet God face to face but also see the universe, in every dimension of its being and becoming, as God's continuing and creative self-manifestation.<sup>97</sup>

Through the animation of sense analogies, Kelly leads us towards a vision of the resurrected life. The creative works of the human spirit, from art to music, from mystical prayer to the work of scholars, evoke more than a mere taste of the future world of the resurrected life;<sup>98</sup> our senses are invited, immersed into the Spirit's sweetness and fragrance. In effect this translates as the vision of a new order of the universe, namely of living *in* the resurrection of Christ. For Kelly, this is a time of feasting on God's reality - the risen Christ. As a result, through encountering the risen Christ, we are invited to feast on the abundance of his steadfast love. Such feasting unveils 'the beginning of a new creation'<sup>99</sup> of righteousness and faithfulness wherein we are transfigured and transformed. In the transfiguration of resurrection with Christ, a new 'space-time' existence unfolds as the transformation of our 'future spiritual embodiment'.<sup>100</sup> Here the Spirit's force of creativity unites the source of all being (the Father) with the form of all being (the Son). Creation and redemption are poured

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<sup>97</sup> Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, 172.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 176-7.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 176-7.

forth together. Might not Gerard Manley Hopkins have spoken of such glory when he wrote in ‘God’s Grandeur,’ ‘There lives the dearest freshness deep down things’?<sup>101</sup>

To feast then with the risen Christ invites a moment of transformation into the ‘dearest freshness’ of God’s glory: the risen Christ gives glory in all manner or form of Creation – whether in an autumn leaf, a baby’s smile or a beloved’s sorrow. A poet’s or artist’s eye of inspiration and wonder may by example lead us to smell the sweetness of a rose, freesia, wild violet and lilac, inhale the fragrance of a lily, hyacinth, lavender and boronia, or to listen to ‘the eternal music’ of Trinitarian love in all Creation. If we are then able to gaze towards heaven singing ‘psalms and hymns and spiritual songs ... singing and making melody to the Lord’ (Eph 5:19), might not then ‘the dearest freshness’ of the risen Christ transform our hearts into a Eucharistic splendour of ‘joy and gladness’ and ‘thanksgiving’ (Isa 51:3). Given the epiphany of divine mystery lies in the revelation of Christ resurrected, something of the mystery of heaven beckons to be related. We could imagine this something as ‘the voice of song’ (Isa 51:3) rejoicing of being invited to feast on the reality of love, mercy and forgiveness in the Father’s kingdom.

### **Conclusion: ‘For I was hungry and you gave me food’**

The death of a beloved may well remind us that the Kingdom of God is near. The death of one in whom we are so fond of signifies that love never ends and continues to be born into an ever new expression of intimacy. Through the eyes of faith, we may discover hope in a profound passivity that God is near; indeed that we are ‘seen by God’<sup>102</sup> in both our mourning

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<sup>101</sup> Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, 27.

<sup>102</sup> Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord Vol. I*, 191.

and love. The death of the loved one reveals an infinite amount of meaning; it signifies a final transformation and consummation of our beings into the resurrected life of Christ. At times, we may not sense the future in the promise of goodness. We may act as if the small goodness of being-for-the-other is possible without eschatology, the grace of fulfilment, redemption and healing. Is it possible then to fall into the thinking that God has withdrawn from history, refusing consolations, and to rest more on a faceless and impersonal ‘god’<sup>103</sup> rather than a personal God?

Levinas may well question, ‘The enigma of a God speaking in man and of man not counting on any god?’<sup>104</sup> Levinas’ distinction between ‘God’ and ‘god’ may help to explain an inopportune future where ‘faceless gods, impersonal gods’ contaminate our vision to make the future ‘unforeseeable’ and ‘losing itself in nothingness’.<sup>105</sup> Goodness then without any future, any eschatology, is but a falling into ‘the egoism of enjoyment’<sup>106</sup> for oneself; the antipathy of alterity. So then, we can become disoriented and ‘enslaved to the elemental spirits (gods)’ (Gal 4:3) projected by our ego or thirst to reduce *my* future to self-care and competitive personal glory and achievements leaving others lonely and forgotten. In contrast,

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<sup>103</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 142.

<sup>104</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 154.

<sup>105</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 142, 158, 160.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

possessing an eschatological sense in being,<sup>107</sup> namely the goodness of God, transforms the actions of the self into the small goodness of responsibility for-the-other.

God's word in the other's face, wavering like 'a blinking light,' leaves us on 'the very pivot of revelation';<sup>108</sup> an ambiguity in being where we do not know truly whether we have listened to God's word or not. To have an eschatological sense, to distinguish between God's word in the other's face and 'the facelessness of the pagan gods,'<sup>109</sup> reflects the hope of encountering the Kingdom of God, to discover the gift of the One who loves us rather than pursuing the enjoyment of any magical intervention or magical otherness that conjures up responsibility without any personal engagement. A theology of feasting becomes a movement towards God's goodness, the one whom we can trust ('I am who I am' (Ex 3:14)), who embraces, penetrates, animates and provokes us with the risen Christ.

We need to take a step away from 'experiencing' or enjoying a faceless god's word to 'encountering' the deepest passivity (a 'boundless self-surrender'<sup>110</sup>) of being oriented by the risen Christ to be what we receive: graceful - that means - responsible for the other. The encounter signifies the diachrony of God's word as it comes to us through the eschatological time of responsibility for the other. In a way, the problem is that we do not always open to

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<sup>107</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 'Meaning and Sense' in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, edited by Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 64.

<sup>108</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 154.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>110</sup> Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord Vol. I*, 191.

God's goodness; the time of the other has not penetrated the moral conscience. But for goodness to possess an eschatological future, we need to take on Christ's gentleness and meekness to speak face to face (2 Cor 10:1) as if we are sharing a banquet with the other in the Kingdom of God, an unthematizable realm of God's love and promise of forgiveness. Through such openness and small goodness, we can be truly chosen by God like the 'the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame' (Lk 14:21) and be invited to the 'great dinner' (Lk 14:16) of the Kingdom of God. The Good-in-us animates the grace of eschatological fulfilment, which for the most part we do not see because of our competing self-interest and ego-centric self. Redemption and healing awaits as does the Kingdom for it is new as much as it is near in the risen Christ's presence of healing and forgiveness in us.

Essentially, both Christ's death and resurrection underpin a theology of feasting in the Kingdom of God, culminating in the hope for Parousia, for the return of Christ. And in the hope of meeting our loved one again, lies the face of the risen Christ who beckons us to his table in the Father's Kingdom and share the heavenly feast of joy, thanksgiving and song with those on the margins of society. Then, if we look closely as we sit beside the 'stranger, widow and orphan' (Ex 22:21-22) we may discover the Messiah's face saying to us, 'for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me' (Matt 25:35).

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