

“The Son of Man Came Eating and Drinking”

Sermon delivered 12 April 2015 (the Sunday after Easter) at West Hamilton Community Church by Richard Storey

Readings:

Psalm 65:9-13

John 21:1-13

1 Cor 11:20-34

Some of us will have fasted in some way during Lent as a part of our journey with Christ to the cross. We will have experienced the struggle of self-denial and the joy of that special closeness to Christ as we have shared his suffering. Many of us will have enjoyed special festivities on Easter Sunday, eating chocolate and other festive foods to share the joy of celebrating Jesus resurrection. Now, with the fasting and the feasting over, we are settling back into normal life.

In my last sermon we were asking the question “how can we find God in the daily rhythms and routines of life” and we discovered the rich ways that water provides both metaphors for our relationship with God and a means for us to deepen that relationship. Like water, food is a daily reality for us. In New Zealand, we are never far from our next meal. Food is something we think about constantly, spend much of our day preparing or consuming, and spend much of our income on. Today I want to explore whether we can deepen our relationship with God through the ways that we eat. And if so, whether we can honour God and proclaim his kingdom through the ways we eat?

On the surface it might seem strange to think we could draw close to God in eating. After all, what could be more “of the flesh” than our physical appetites? And doesn’t Jesus call us to shift our focus away from food that spoils to food that endures to eternal life? Yet, I have become convinced that we can find God, honour him and proclaim his kingdom daily by eating in God’s way. I am equally convinced that the opposite is true – that the ways we eat can keep us apart from God, dishonour him and declare the kingdom of this world. Why? Because the Bible, and Jesus in particular, have so much to say about eating. And because eating is fundamentally about relationships.

Food is a gift of God

One of the first things the Bible says about food, which Psalm 65 (in this morning’s reading) affirms, is that food is the gift of God, and should be a reason to praise to One who created and provided it. This is simple stuff, and I expect that most societies throughout most of history, whatever their beliefs about God or gods, would have been profoundly conscious that food comes to them only by the will of God. But we live in a society that has certainly rejected this belief, and has done everything it can to ensure that food is always available, always abundant and always cheap. Our society has been spectacularly successful at this, which has had some great benefits, for sure, in reducing hunger and poverty, but also some terrible consequences. Not least is that we have profoundly different attitudes to food than our ancestors. With food always available and always cheap, we can eat with scarcely a thought to its true value, where it has come from or how it has come to us. Perhaps this is part of the reason that in developed countries, people throw away 30-

50% of all the food that they buy. Perhaps it is also part of the reason that one in three New Zealanders is obese and another one third overweight? Paradoxically, in developed countries, the third most common illness in young females after obesity and asthma is anorexia. All of these statistics suggest to me a society that has forgotten that food is a gift of God – given gladly, given joyfully and given to be received with thanks and praise. How can we make eating something that draws us close to God and honours him? By joining with the Psalmist and giving heartfelt thanks and praise to God each time that we eat.

Eating is about community

Our need to eat means that we are members of community within community within community. When I say members, I don't mean in the sense that we might be members of a rugby club or a facebook group – a group that we might interact with on occasion when we have time or interest. I mean in the same sense that our arms and legs are members of our bodies – parts of the whole, continually relying on one another for support and nourishment.

What memberships do we have through our daily eating? We are in community with

- The people we eat with: our families or flatmates
- Those who have prepared and cooked the meal, and those who have served it to us: families, flatmates, restauranteurs or maybe someone in a fast-food or caterer's kitchen.
- Our local community: the local dairy owner, supermarket checkout people, or perhaps friends who have gifted us food.
- Distributors: truck drivers, packaging warehouses, ships and planes, exporters from the country of origin, packers in the country of origin, truck drivers from the point of production, packers at the point of production.
- Manufacturers/processors
- Growers
- Seed producers
- Fertiliser and pesticide companies
- All those who support these people (build trucks, fuel them, manufacture packaging, build warehouses and shops, those who manage the food supply chains)

By simply looking through our fridge and cupboards at home, I found myself connected to people across New Zealand and on almost every continent of the globe.

In addition to all the humans we depend on for our food, the others in our community are the non-human creatures that produce the food:

- animals that our meat comes from, plants that our non-meat products come from, the plants and animals that our food animals eat, pollinators (bees, bumblebees, possibly birds, butterflies, flies and beetles), the yeasts and bacteria in our bread, yoghurt, cheese and wine, soil organisms (in a handful of soil there are more micro-organisms than there are people on the planet), symbiotic bacteria (e.g. in plant nodules, cattle guts,
- Animals that keep pest populations under control – praying mantis, beetles, cats, raptors,
- Creatures in our gut that help us digest the food
- Decomposers of our waste – worms, fungi, bacteria, ants

We also rely on the non-living parts of creation: soil, wind, freshwater, sea, sunlight, CO₂, nutrient cycles. And finally, through our eating we are in relationship with the Creator who made all things, sustains all things and promises to provide for all our needs.

Eating is a regular daily affirmation that we are members together of community within community within community. Our need to eat means that we cannot escape this basic fact – that we rely on all the other members of our community for our survival and sustenance, and that our health and wellbeing depends on the ability of others to continue providing for us, in other words, on the health and wellbeing of all members of the community, human and non-human.

The dinner table, then, is fundamentally a place of community. Indeed, in probably every culture, eating together is among the most powerful ways that people have to extend and share in each other's lives. This is why the gospels frequently show Jesus eating with people. How did Jesus regard a meal and how does it differ from the ways we often eat?

In the meals described in the gospels a common thread runs through – Jesus treated meals as a means for strengthening community, restoring broken relationships and nurturing others. This morning's gospel reading is a beautiful example of this. The risen Christ has appeared to his disciples and convinced them he is alive, turning their despair into hope and joy. But one thing is not yet made right. Peter is still deeply ashamed of disowning his friend Jesus at his time of greatest need. How does Jesus restore Peter, the closest of his earthly friends, to full relationship? By inviting Peter to breakfast. Perhaps it is important, too, that he gave Peter the opportunity to contribute food for the meal – the church's first potluck! The gospels mention other meals too, where Jesus restored outcasts as members of the community by eating with them, provided a much-needed meal for a hungry and fading crowd, spoke of the Kingdom of God as a great feast in which the poor and forgotten were invited, and told a parable of a great feast given for an unworthy but repentant son. Jesus also used meals as opportunities to serve and nurture others, the greatest example being his washing of his disciples' feet at the Last Supper. His promise to those who open the door and invite him into their lives is that he will come and eat with them. For Jesus, eating together is a powerful means and a sure sign of trust, nurture and friendship.

Not surprising, then, that the means Jesus chose for us to remember him was a meal, as we read in the 1 Corinthians passage. This brings into focus another aspect of eating that is actually shocking, and we use many ways to hide it from ourselves. The eating that gives us life requires the death of another. Vegetarians can claim, of course, that only plants need to die for them, but most of us regularly eat animals which have the same breath of life as we have, and have sacrificed their lives to sustain ours. In the Eucharist, Jesus identifies himself as the one sacrificed to bring us life. This indeed was the greatest act of reconciliation – a meal in which people are reconciled with God. We are all partakers of that greatest of all meals. What does it mean for us, and how does the way eat compare with the ways Jesus ate?

To Paul (the writer of 1 Corinthians) it was obvious that if we share in the great meal of reconciliation, we must eat it in ways that include and embrace, not divide. Paul's harsh criticism of the way the Corinthians were eating was that they were creating divisions between the haves and have nots. Some were eating to excess and denying others even the chance to satisfy their hunger. Such a meal, that creates division instead of unity, cannot be the Lord's Supper, says Paul.

What about us? The way we celebrate the Lord's Supper is not likely to cause some to get drunk and others remain hungry. But what about how we eat and use food in our daily lives?

- Do we use mealtimes as precious times of fellowship, or does each person in the house grab a bite on the run, or eat in silence in front of the television?
- Who do we invite to eat with us? Is it only our friends, who we know we can have a good time with, or also those that are in need of friendship, support, or food itself? I have seen

many times how much people appreciate a home-cooked meal made with love and served with generosity. There are few other ways I have found that bond people together so warmly. Do we provide gifts of food to others at times of need? We know from experience what a wonderful thing it is to receive a meal at a time of need, and I've seen the effect on others from my wife's generous gifts of meals and baking.

And what of those other relationships beyond the dinner table that extend into communities across the world and into the soil and the deep oceans?

- Does the rice that we put on the table provide a small-time farmer in Thailand with a living wage or does it give him so few pennies that he must sell his daughter while we enjoy a cheap meal?
- Is the chocolate we enjoy so much at Easter grown by children sold into slavery in Ghana? Unless the label says Fairtrade, it probably does.
- And what about our relationships with other creatures? Do the eggs that we buy from the supermarket come from happy healthy hens with room to move, or are the hens confined to cages so small they cannot stand and are they so stressed that they must have their beaks trimmed so they don't lacerate themselves?

Psalm 65 praises God as the one who provides food for his people. But it also speaks of how God does this. God provides food by caring for the land and enriching it. In the process of producing food, God's land is actually made more fruitful. The meadows and the valleys shout for joy and sing as they yield their grain and sustain their flocks. Contrast that with modern farming and fishing methods: in order to maximise production

- we have depleted water supplies so much that 1 in 10 of the world's large rivers no longer reaches the sea
- 40% of soil used for agriculture is classed as either degraded or seriously degraded (latter means 70% of the topsoil is gone)
- 85% of the world's fisheries are either fully exploited or depleted.

How can we make eating a more spiritual act? By recognising the many others who have worked and sacrificed to bring food to us (we may need to do some research in order to find out), and giving thanks for them and the One who ultimately brings forth growth from the seed.

Conclusion

Food is a gift of God, given generously, given in love. If we will receive it with gratitude, we are likely to have a right relationship with food and find God in our mealtimes and all our eating.

Our need to eat makes us members of a vast community that includes people all over the world, as well as a myriad of non-human creatures that work and sacrifice to provide us with food. Therefore, even if it is cheap for us to buy, our food has almost certainly been costly to produce and provide for us. If we will acknowledge all those who have worked and sacrificed for our nourishment, we will gain the joy of belonging in community with them and are likely to treat the members of our community with justice and respect.

Sharing food is one of the most intimate forms of human fellowship. Jesus used shared meals to heal, restore and affirm. We also have the ability to bless others through gifts of food and hospitality.

In all these ways we can draw close to God, honour him and proclaim his kingdom in the daily rhythms and routines of our lives

Ideas for home groups:

1. Watch a film together. There are a number of old and new films that show the spiritual and relational power of food. Some examples are *Babette's Feast*, *The Lunchbox*, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, *Chocolat*. Watch one of these and discuss: how did food work to change relationships among the characters and/or produce inner change in them? Could any of these changes be described as the work of God? Were there examples of food being misused/abused? Do these films give you new ideas about how you can use food or hospitality to show God's love and point people to the Bread of Life?
2. Hold a God-honouring potluck meal. Everyone brings and/or does something for the meal that honours God. Before or during the meal each person explains in what way(s) their contribution honours God. Spend some time praising God for these things and for his provision of food. There may be aspects that despite your best efforts do not honour God (e.g. plastic packaging left as waste). In prayer, grieve for these things. Think about as many aspects of the meal as possible:
 - who (e.g. who is invited to the meal, who worked to produce the food, etc.)
 - what (e.g. what is eaten, what is left behind after the meal?)
 - where (e.g. where will you hold the meal, e.g. in a home, outdoors in a beautiful place? Where was the food produced? Locally? Home-grown?)
 - how (e.g. how were the ingredients produced? Organically? Through Fair Trade? how did you prepare the meal? How are newcomers made to feel welcome and a sense of belonging?).
3. Read these Bible passages: John 6:1-15, 25-35 and Luke 22:14-22. Discuss:
 - a. What can we learn about Jesus' attitude to food and eating from these passages?
 - b. What would a meal with Jesus be like? How would it differ from the ways we often eat?
 - c. Should the pattern Jesus set for the Eucharist meal change how we regard food and how we eat our regular meals? In what ways?