

Isaiah 55: 1-9; 1 Corinthians 10: 1-13.

24.03.19

Rich food.

I'm not quite sure why it is that the music of the Rolling Stones seem to be coming to my mind of late, but last week I began my sermon with a quotation from their classic song, 'Gimme shelter'. This week, as I pondered our reading from Isaiah 55, I was reminded of their great album entitled 'Beggars' Banquet', for that is pretty much what is depicted in the opening verses of our passage.

'Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price...
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
And delight yourselves with rich food.

The image is of a kind of beggars' banquet, a feast offered to those without money, a rich feast that will satisfy in a way that other food will not – a feast which will leave us nourished where other food leaves us hungry and craving more.

What Isaiah is speaking of, however, is not a literal feast or banquet. Isaiah is talking about salvation, about God's gift to us of life that comes through knowing God and honouring God and belonging to God. And our relationship with God is depicted over and over again in the Bible by the image of food. And Jesus pictured God's Kingdom, God's realm, as a wedding feast. And when we celebrate the Lord's supper we take bread and wine and they symbolise Jesus' body broken and his blood shed for our salvation. Salvation is a beggar's banquet to which all are invited. And this explains Isaiah's use of this image of food and drink here in this passage.

Isaiah is addressing the Jewish people when they are in captivity, exiled in Babylon. And as exiles they face a dilemma: are they going to stray true to their Jewish faith? Are they going to remain Jews? Or are they going to be seduced into becoming Babylonians, worshipping Babylonian gods and adopting Babylonian customs? And at the end of this chapter there are beautiful

verses depicting Israel returning from Babylon, returning from exile and captivity:

‘You shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
and the mountains and hills before you
will burst into song...’

Here is the great return to Jerusalem, the homecoming from Babylon. But the question will you come? Will you come out, will you depart and return, or has Babylon become your home?

And the temptation to go Babylonian must have been great. After all the first generation of captives might have pined for Jerusalem, for home, but subsequent generations would begin to feel at home in Babylon. And no doubt there were inducements: no doubt the exiles could benefit from full participation in the life of Babylon and in letting go of their Jewish identity. And Isaiah is pleading with them: ‘don’t sell out!’ Don’t be fooled! Babylon and its gods may have superficial appeal but they cannot satisfy the soul: Babylon is thin gruel. Babylon is junk food – instant gratification but no real nourishment. So,

‘Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labour for that which does not satisfy?’

Stay true to God. Keep the faith and delight yourselves in God’s rich feast which is free for all – a beggars’ banquet.

We have in the Bible the story of one Jew in Babylon who was faithful. His name was Daniel and he did very well in Babylon and rose to a high position in the king’s court. But he remained true to the God of Israel. He flourished in Babylon but kept his faith – and how did he demonstrate that? How did he show his loyalty to the living God? Well, he refused to eat the food of the king’s court. He declined the impure, unclean diet of Babylon. He ate only vegetables and drank only water. In other words Daniel demonstrated which God he served by his diet, how he ate. And so Isaiah takes the image of food to depict the choice that the Jews in Babylon must make:

‘Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food’ -

Given the choice between the junk-food rations of the empire and the abundant bread of life which God offers there is no contest.

So, turning to our reading from 1st Corinthians, we know that things in the church at Corinth are going awry and they are compromising their faith. And like the Jews in exile in Babylon the church in Corinth must make a choice between conformity to Corinth and conformity to Jesus. And again, as in Isaiah, that choice is depicted in terms of food and drink. Paul reminds the church of the Israelites in the wilderness eating and drinking, eating manna from heaven and drinking water from the rock, and he recalls the lure of Egypt, the temptation to return back to captivity – and that was happening. The church in Corinth was being seduced back to Egypt. Old habits and behaviour were resurfacing and if we had read on we would have found we would have found where it was all coming to a head. And where was that? Why, at the Lord's table! around food! To Paul's utter dismay he discovered that at the Lord's Table the rich were feasting while the poor were going without. It was no longer a beggars' banquet. It had succumbed to wealth and status and it was there, around the table, that the choices between Corinth and Jesus, between Egypt and God's new realm found expression.

You see, it's all about food. Food becomes a symbol, food becomes an expression of how we live, the choices that we make, the habits that we follow, the gods we serve. And so this morning it might be instructive for us to think about how we eat and what it reveals about us, what it says about the world we live in. And at the very simplest level, we are told that one distinct feature of modern living is that families no longer sit down and eat together. Food is consumed more often than not in front of TVs and computer screens in different rooms and at different times. When I ministered in Cambridge in the UK I heard of a Cambridge College where students had to be stopped from coming and going during College dinners – apparently the whole idea of sitting down together and ending the meal together was lost on our educational elite. But this is more than about mere table manners. Our eating practices reveal the breakdown in community and our compulsive attachment to our screens. The table becomes a symbol of our whole understanding of human intercourse and community.

To take another example. Sally and I have decided that for our Lent discipline we will do our best to give up plastic. After all, there has recently been a belated awareness of the untold damage being done to the planet by plastic, and further evidence came last week in a news feature about a dead whale washed up in the Philippines with over 40 kilos of plastic in its stomach.

So Sally and I are trying to eliminate plastic from our lives, but the food industry makes it hard. Try buying mushrooms that do not come in a plastic case. Try avoiding plastic in a supermarket! In some cases each and every aubergine, or pepper is individually wrapped in plastic – what on earth is the point of that? And so the food industry discloses our cavalier attitude to creation and nature which is killing us. ‘Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread?’ And speaking of our relationship to creation and nature, what about the meat industry and its appalling treatment of animals - animals over which God has entrusted with responsibility? And we know that the level of meat production required to satisfy demand is a major factor in environmental destruction – think methane gas and its contribution to global warming, and think of the destruction of rain forests for the growing of soya to feed cattle to produce beef to produce burgers. And we know that the level of meat production required to satisfy demand results in antibiotics being less effective, and is a major cause of swine and avian flu. And our food production, as we know, results in vast food waste – huge quantities of food thrown away, while great swathes of humanity struggle to feed themselves every day. And don’t forget that the great symbol of globalisation, the towering symbol of one world united under the great god of capitalism is what? Well, think of that great global golden image, that great angelic sign: McDonalds! Yes, there is not a corner of the world where human beings are not gathered under the sacred golden wings of the McDonald’s symbol as a mother hen gathers her brood. The world finds its unity in fast-food burgers. It all comes down to food.

Why do we collude with it all? Why do we spend our money for that which is not bread?’ Why do we do it? Well, I’ll tell you why. It’s because we are in thrall to false gods. We are ruled by the false gods of productivity and consumption and efficiency, and profit, and time-saving. And these are the gods of Egypt, and they are the gods of Babylon. And as in Isaiah’s day they do not satisfy and our capitulation to these gods only leaves us even more greedy and grasping and endlessly wanting more. Food and the food industry and what we eat and the way we eat reveals starkly the gods we serve. The choice between Babylon and Jerusalem is reflected in the menu, and we are called to come out, to leave, to depart from Babylon.

Listen, I am not trying to make vegetarians or vegans of us all. That’s not my business, though a reduction in meat consumption would undoubtedly

benefit the planet. But we need to see that food is profoundly symbolic. It discloses to us profound truths about who we are and who we serve. The Bible is rich in imagery of food and feasting and banquets and how we eat and what we eat cuts to the very heart of our faith. And as much as in Isaiah's day we are tempted to make choices which offer life but which do not satisfy – in fact which destroy us.

This season of Lent is traditionally a time of fasting, but if it is not your practice to fast perhaps it could at least be a time to think about food and the choices we make and what they disclose.

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, listen to me;
listen, so that you may live. Amen.

Holy and gracious God,
creator of the world and giver of life
we praise and bless your holy name.
You are the God who made us,
you are the God who freed your people
from slavery in Egypt,
the God who fed them in the wilderness.
And you are the God who has come among us
in Jesus Christ, the bread of life, who feeds our very souls.
You nourish us with your word,
and you quench our thirst with the your Spirit.
O God we come to you, spiritually hungry.
We confess that we turn from you,
seeking fulfilment elsewhere,
spending our money for that which is not bread,
and labouring for that which does not satisfy.
We pray together for your grace and your pardon.
Forgive in us what has gone wrong,
Repair in us what is wasted,
Reveal in us what is good.
And nourish us with better food
than we could ever purchase:
your Word, your love,
your daily bread for life's journey
in the company of Jesus Christ our Lord.
In his name and in his words we pray together, saying...