

Bread of Life

'Take, this is my body'. 'I am the bread of life.' Scandalous words: 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' To the world this sort of talk is disturbing, distasteful, sacrilegious. Yet to Christians there never has been a more powerful symbol of what it means to share the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is about daily recognition of need: 'Give us this day our daily bread.' It is about rescue from starvation in the wilderness: 'Manna. (Meaning 'What is it?') he gave them manna in the desert.' 'This is the living bread which came down from heaven and gave life to the world'. 'Lord, give us this bread always.' And there, in that wonderful resurrection encounter on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24), it is the moment he breaks the bread that his disciples recognise him. 'Did not our hearts burn within us?' Somehow the meaning of it all is recovered at the moment at which the bread is shared around that table.

End Hunger Fast is, as you may have heard, a national campaign for people, of all faiths and none, to fast, pray, speak out for the half million people who are going hungry in Britain each week. The campaign (www.endhungerfast.co.uk) invites us to a National Day of Fasting on April 4, and a vigil in Parliament Square on April 16 - the Wednesday of Holy Week, the day before Maundy Thursday, when of all days in the year we remember the Last Supper. 'You are to love one another as I have loved you.'

It is remarkable to see the ways in which the churches have led the efforts to rescue people from hunger - through food banks, for example. Whatever the causes, and whatever the particular needs of those who use food banks, there is something profoundly disturbing about this fact; that at the beginning of the 21st Century 5,500 people were treated for malnutrition in Britain last year - a doubling in the last five years. Almost as disturbing as this is the increase in obesity and of diseases associated with poor diet.

This tells me that something has gone profoundly wrong with our relationship with food, and that this is a sign of a breakdown in human relationships. The insight of Jesus Christ, that bread (food) was at the heart of our relationships both with each other and with God is, I think, relevant here. Let me try to sum this up in two ways: **hungry people, unhealthy people.**

Hungry people. The images we have glimpsed from Syria of starving communities - people forced to eat grass and seeds, children dying of malnutrition, demonstrate what happens when there is literally nothing to eat. Alongside this we have the image of British families running out of money because the bank is empty - no pay, no benefit cheque, all gone on rent or whatever - so in desperation they turn to the local Food Bank. In the same street, of course, will be people who are full. Those are different situations and in both cases we find ourselves at a bit of a loss as to what the longer term solution is. In the Syrian case, there will have been some sharing between needy neighbours, and callous disregard of a whole neighbourhood by those who could let food in through the road blocks and bombardment. Until negotiation and a sense of compassion and human feeling open up the ways through, people will starve. That there is food for them is not in doubt. It is access to it that is the problem. Now here is the similarity with the British situation. There is food in the supermarkets and shops and neighbourhoods. Access to that food is the failure which Food Banks seek to remedy, albeit temporarily. Yet, at the same time as provision is made, we read that thousands of tonnes of food is thrown away by the supermarkets (or from households) each day.

Nothing illustrates better the terrible absurdity of this mad world and our attitude to food:

Hungry people. There is plenty of food, yet millions go hungry.

Unhealthy people. There is good food, but people make themselves ill through over eating and poor diets.

This year in Lent, as I have done the last two Lents, I have given up lunch from Monday to Saturday. This is no great hardship in fact, but what it is doing is reminding me to think and pray about food; 'give us (all) our daily bread.'

Firstly, the sharing of food, in whatever way, is a demonstration of compassion. After the food banks (it would be a terrible scandal if they become a permanent feature of our society) we must continue to find ways of sharing good food. It is good to hear of projects, for example, to release food from supermarkets that is near or just past its sell by date for sale at low cost to those in need. But it will also be good if neighbours hear of others who are hungry and take round a meal, or invite them round to eat.

Secondly, we need to recover our connection with good real food, that nourishes us and makes us healthy. In the press, in recent days, there has been a series of counter claims by nutrition experts: on the one hand, 'too great a consumption of animal protein will make you ill', and on the other, 'animal fats are not necessarily bad for you'. In the midst of complex and confusing claims I still go back to basics. The American food writer, Michael Pollan, summed it up thus, in seven words: "Eat food, not too much, mostly plants." My own reading on this subject repeatedly warns me that the worst things for us are processed and refined foods: sugar, white flour, hydrogenated oils, complex ingredients designed to keep processed food 'fresh' - look at the ingredients on a packet of, say, pot noodles and you'll get the gist. I confess I love that feeling of fresh sliced white bread - but it doesn't like me! And then, when I smell it (try it!) it reminds me of what they put in it and what they take out of it. It smells like the stable, rather than the wheat!

Every week we gather around a table: 'take, eat' we say. This Easter, then, let our contemplation on The Bread of Life (which gives life to the world) be one in which we learn again how to share food, and how to eat the food that nourishes. Jesus wants us to be whole in body, mind and spirit.

At that table on the road to Emmaus they said, 'Did not our hearts burn within us?' I am certain it wasn't indigestion! What they learnt was that the Bread of Life had come to them and taught them to share the Good News of God's love and that in eating and drinking we can all be made whole.

May eating properly lead us to share, and may we eat what truly nourishes!