

## **Sunday 3 August 2008: The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity**

**“You give them something to eat”**

**Readings: Isaiah 55:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21**

*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.... I will make with you an everlasting covenant.*

*The disciples came to him and said, ".. send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."*

Even after more than five years of living here right in the very centre of London, one of the things that still amazes me is the number of places there are to eat in the area – cafés, restaurants, take-aways, coffee bars – there seem to be thousands of them. Walk down Villiers Street from the Strand to Embankment station, and I think almost every business there is associated with food in some way. When our offices were temporarily located up in Bloomsbury, I sometimes wondered as I walked up there from St Martin’s after morning prayer whether, as a fund-raising activity, I could get a manufacturer of indigestion remedies to sponsor a “breakfast crawl” taking in all the possibilities of a full English presented by that walk of less than a mile!

Food may be a physical necessity but in almost every culture it so much more than that. Sharing food with others, whether welcoming them into our homes, or marking a special occasion in an upmarket restaurant, or a family picnic of sand-filled sandwiches at the beach, or a heart-to-heart with a friend over a cup of coffee, carries with it a significance that is more than what is consumed. It reinforces relationships; it symbolises a sharing of ourselves and our concerns; it carries memories and hopes; it links us with one another and the created order; it allows us to express creativity and love.

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Perhaps it’s because food and drink carry with them such profound meaning, that the current global food crisis causes such deep seated anxiety. Uncertainty about food supplies, whatever the cause represents a threat to the very fabric of humanity both in physical terms and in moral and spiritual terms.

For over 200 years, economists have been raising questions about the sustainability of the world’s food supply. As the population rises, can we continue to feed ourselves? Each time that question has been asked, technology and improved food production practices – even if now ethically questionable ones – have provided an answer. But this time, the factors affecting the global food crisis are more complex than ever, and technological solutions are not the obvious answer. Years of under-investment in agriculture in some of the poorest countries, the global push for biofuels which takes food crops out of production, massive growth in demand in expanding economies like China and India, land disputes in many parts of the world, and climate change which also contributes significantly to increasing concern over water supplies together point to a situation with potentially long term consequences for the way we live as a global community. The facts and statistics are disturbing. In Bangladesh,

the price of coarse rice has risen over 70% in a year, more than 16% in one month alone. In Afghanistan, the price of bread rose over 90% in just over a year, the price of wheat by over 60%, and there are harrowing stories of a father selling an 11 year-old daughter to pay for food for the rest of the family. In countries where many of the poorest already spend up to 70% of their income on food, such increases drive millions to the brink of starvation and threaten major social dislocations and unrest.

For most people in rich western countries, the impact is not as immediately catastrophic as for the world's poorest, yet even the USA reports a recent doubling in the rate of food inflation experienced in the last 20 years, while the record low-levels of global stocks of basic foods like rice and wheat threaten the inter-relations of many national economies. Tim Lang, Professor of Food Policy at City University here in London, has warned that this food crisis demands what he terms "multi-solutions", demanding that we make choices for the good of both our own health and for the good of the planet. Our relationship with what we consume is perhaps more than ever a statement about our relationship with those around us, with our immediate and our global neighbours, with the whole created order, with the creator – God himself.

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The global food crisis of the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century may make those complex interrelationships more obvious than they have ever been, but the evidence of scripture tells us that such an understanding is not new. In our reading earlier, the prophet Isaiah issues the call from God to his hungry people – that in him their hunger will be satisfied and their thirst quenched. But he goes on immediately to speak of the covenant between God and God's people – an everlasting covenant of steadfast sure love. After all this is a God who fed his people with manna in the wilderness and water from the rock, even when they doubted and grumbled and became faithless. And time and time again, the prophets portray the fulfilment of God's covenant promises as a future where the hungry rejoice in rich food and well-matured wine; as a banquet to which all are invited and all sit and eat freely; as a land of fruitfulness and plenty. The fulfilment of God's promises and God's covenant with his people is the restoration of all those relationships which our eating and drinking together symbolise and which are so distorted by human greed, and carelessness and self-centredness.

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The story of the feeding of the crowd which we heard today from Matthew's Gospel was so important to the early church that it appeared in some form in all four gospels. It was important because it revealed Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of God's promise, as the one who did and does feed his people in the wilderness. But in this meal, the disciples then and we his followers now, also see the echoes of that other great meal that we remember day by day and week by week when bread is taken and blessed and broken and shared that the world may never be the same again. And for we who share at this table where Christ feeds us with himself, the relationships of which we are part can never be the same again.

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“You give them something to eat”. For the hungry who stand at our door, locally or globally; for the earth abused by our seemingly insatiable appetites, and thoughtlessness about the impact of our lifestyle; for future generations yet unborn, who will live with the consequences of choices made now, Jesus Christ stands at this table and says to us “you give them something to eat”.

We cannot share the abundance of God’s grace at the communion table and remain oblivious to the very real issues of poverty, hunger and the stewardship of God’s world today. We cannot share at this table and be oblivious to those with whom we share other tables – at home, at work, at the supermarket checkout, at the tables of the great economic institutions. What happens at the Eucharist is not confined to this building, but shapes us and our relationships as individuals and as a community. We who share the bread of life and the wine of the kingdom are drawn into the covenant community and become part of the ongoing story of God and of God’s kingdom. And for a hungry world, that longs for real food, that longs for hope, that longs for justice, that longs for relationships of grace and generosity, Jesus, who gives us himself in bread and wine, still says to his followers:

*"They need not go away; you give them something to eat."*