

## Food and drink - a spiritual barometer

Texts: Psalm 146, James 2:1-17

It's now 11:15. What will you be doing in 2 hours' time? I suspect that the answer for all of us here will be basically the same - we will be sitting down for a spot of lunch. The precise form this takes will, of course, vary from person to person. But I suspect for the vast majority of us, if not every single one of us, we will be having lunch one way or another in 2 hours' time. Had it not been for me asking you to think about this, almost certainly none of us would have given this matter the slightly bit of thought - we would all have taken lunch for granted.

But hundreds of thousands of people up and down the country right now cannot take their next meal for granted. They have empty cupboards at home and little or nothing in the bank account. Many would not be having lunch today; in some cases, parents will decide to go hungry and feed the children. Soon, when autumn really gets going, most of these people will be cold as well as hungry. Many who find themselves in this situation today would have got into this situation only this year because of the combination of economic downturn and soaring food prices. Citizen Advice Scotland handled half a million cases last year: many of the people seeking advice face the choice between buying food and paying bills.

Why am I telling you this? Why should we care? Because one of the most consistent themes throughout the Bible is that God cares deeply about food and its distribution.

Listen to the Psalm that we sang just now:

*Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God ... who keeps faith forever.*

How do we know that God keeps faith forever? Because

*[He] executes justice for the oppressed [and] gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free;  
The LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down.*

God demonstrates that God keeps faith forever by, amongst other things, giving food to the hungry and lifting up those who are bowed down by their circumstances. But exactly *how* does God do this? Our text is disappointing - it doesn't seem to tell us. Have a look at your pews paper and see what it actually says: 'The LORD ... gives food to the hungry ... [and] lifts up those who are bowed down',

*The LORD loves the righteous.*

This seems like a non-sequitur. To understand the logic, we need to recall the story of the Exodus and the giving of the Law. When Israel was hungry and bowed down in the wilderness, God fed them manna from heaven. When they finally entered the land flowing with milk and honey, God told them to live a righteous life in this land. Listen to the book of Deuteronomy:

*There will ... be no one in need among you ... if only you will obey the LORD your God by diligently observing this entire commandment ... (15:4-5)*

Why will there be no one in need among you? Not because the Promised Land will be some kind of utopia. God is a realist! Deuteronomy goes on to say this:

*Since there will never cease to be some in need ... I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land." (15:11)*

So when our psalmist says "The LORD gives food to the hungry ... The LORD loves the righteous," the listener is meant to hear this as a reminder that 'the righteous' is someone who opens his or hand to the poor and needy neighbour.

Very significantly, Luke picks up the thread from Deuteronomy when he tells the story of birth of the church. He wants to tell us that the spirit-filled group of disciples in Jerusalem constitutes the New Israel of God, and he does it by plugging straight back into Deuteronomy. Listen to Luke's description of the disciples' life together:

*There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (4:34-35)*

For Luke, the proof that the church was the New Israel was simply that *there was not a needy person among them* due to their generosity to each other. But alas, this situation did not last. Not so long afterwards, the Apostle James, our Lord's brother, had to remind one particular congregation of God's commandment:

*What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

In other words, food is a spiritual barometer: if we do not care about hunger in our neighbours, we do not care about God.

Do we care about hunger in our world? Some do. That is why our charity night on the 26th October is devoted to The Hunger Project, which works internationally to achieve a sustainable end to hunger in the world. But what about hunger at our door steps? There has always been a few visible signs of hunger and need on our door steps. But Newington has traditionally been a relatively prosperous area, although we don't have to go far beyond to meet deprivation. However, there is now a new phenomenon, not just in Edinburgh, but over the whole of Scotland and the rest of the UK. The phenomenon is called 'hidden hunger'. Citizens Advice Scotland explains it like this:

"It's not just people who are long-term unemployed or those on very low incomes who are struggling, but people from all sorts of backgrounds – many of whom have never been financially vulnerable before. They are having to deal with things like the benefits system for the first time."

At this point, they suddenly discover that the benefits system takes weeks or months to deliver. But they have run out of food today, and the bills are still coming in. They have no idea how to get help; in many cases they are too ashamed to ask for help. So they put on the appearance that everything is fine, but face hunger at home alone, and send their

children to school hungry. All experts on the ground agree that this is happening on our doorsteps.

St. Peter's is an eucharistic community in Newington. Every Sunday we meet at Christ's table to break bread. To me, if this act of holy communion is not going to be a sham, it carries with it the commitment to bring the eucharist into our community by bring bread to the hungry. The end of the Roman Catholic mass says it very well. In Latin, the mass ends with a pithy line:

"Ite, missa est!"

In English, "Go, it's the Mass." The meaning this line is disputed, but to me, it has always meant "Go, take the mass and all that it implies beyond the church doors into the world." As far as St. James is concerned, if that doesn't mean bread for the hungry on our door steps, it doesn't mean anything.

I'm sure few, if any, of you would be objecting to anything I've said so far. No one ever objects to anyone saying that the needy should be fed. No Christian ever dispute that feeding the needy is in principle our godly duty. But how do we actually do it? How do we do it as a church, as a church-in-this-community, especially when we are faced with *hidden* hunger?

Well, the pulpit is not the place to answer that question in detail. Suffice it to say that where there is a will, there is a way. So, for instance, we can run a food bank: a hub that distributes emergency food boxes with three or four days' supply to any who needs it. Right now, the nearest food bank to us is at a church beyond Gilmerton. There are three in the whole city. Being a food bank in Newington, perhaps together with other churches in the area, is one of the most visible ways we can bring the eucharist to the community. It doesn't matter that we don't know how to do it - there is charity that trains churches to set up food banks, teaching them how to liaise with local businesses and care agencies to make it work effectively to deal with visible as well as hidden hunger.

So, the real question is not how, but whether: are we really willing to take the eucharist outside those church doors into Newington and beyond? Today, I invite us all to think about this question before we answer the call at the end of this service:

"Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord!"

The message of James is that if we are not really willing to take the Eucharist to the community, we have no right to answer, 'In the name of Christ, Amen!'"