

Colossians 1: 3-20 & John 6: 5-14 (BCP Readings for Sunday next before Advent)

Today is the Feast of Christ the King – the last Sunday of the Church's Year before Advent begins next week. I won't repeat last year's sermon for this day, on what kind of King, and what kind of Kingdom. And I'll spare you the usual "grumpy old Bishop" moan at this time of year about people celebrating Christmas before even Advent starts, let alone the blasphemous commercialisation of the birth of Jesus. "Hark the herald angels sing: Oxford Street is full of bling". "In the bleak mid-winter, the people all went mad, awaiting not the Saviour's birth but the new John Lewis ad." Etc.

Instead let's focus a little on what we're doing here this morning, and in particular our coming together to share in this meal which we call Holy Communion or The Eucharist.

There are three levels to this sermon. The first is the basic fact that we need to eat in order to live. In Matthew's version of the Gospel story we have just heard, Jesus says "I have compassion on the people and do not want to send them away hungry lest they faint on the way". Today, around the world, the United Nations' food agencies estimate that 815 million people "faint on the way", or regularly go to bed hungry. That's about 11 percent of the world's population.

Here in the West our problem is the opposite: we eat so much that we grow fat and make ourselves ill. In the UK a quarter of our children are overweight or obese. But that's not the whole story. This week has seen the report from Philip Alston, the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, on the effects of Austerity in the UK. He totally rejects the claim that there is no extreme poverty in this country. The Trussell Trust told him that the use of food banks rose by 14% in the last year, and by 52% in areas where universal credit has been rolled out.

So at its most basic it is food which keeps us alive, and too much food that kills us. For some the problem is the cost of dieting, for others simply knowing where the next meal is coming from. But we all need food to live.

Let's drill down to another level, because food is about more than satisfying our bodily needs, especially when we eat together. Whether sitting round a table, or more likely these days sitting in front of the television, family life is often centred round sharing a meal. In the Gospels some of the most significant things happen at meal times, from this feeding of the five thousand to the Easter stories at the lakeside and at the end of the road to Emmaus. And the inclusive nature of the Gospel itself is shown by who is invited to the meal: the religious people complain when Jesus eats with undesirables, "tax collectors and sinners", but that he tells them is the guest list for the Kingdom of God.

When we eat together we are saying something about belonging. When we share food it becomes more than meeting a physical need, it moves into the sharing of lives. It expresses something greater, and it satisfies a greater need. We are more than individual consumers of what can be bought in the shops. Eating together, and who is invited, says a lot about who we are.

I offer a local example. The decision to play down the importance of formal dining in the Inns of Court has received a mixed response. From one side, yes, it is good to make access to the Law more open, less elitist, removing the barriers which people from different backgrounds might perceive. That is important. But it also risks losing what a shared meal may signify. In institutions like this eating together binds people to each other, it links them to a past which they have inherited and which they need to carry forward, it fosters a sense of corporate responsibility for what happens here and what role we play in the wider society.

Without that sense of belonging we may find ourselves swept along in a direction which leads to a superficial rather than a wholesome life. This can be seen most of all in education, when it becomes a primarily functional activity, emphasising training more than formation, instruction more than debate, gainful employment more than pursuing a vocation, and the transferring of skills more than encouraging the growth of the whole person.

Another report out this week said that Church primary schools now out-perform even private primary schools. Why might that be? Maybe it has something to do with a value system and a sense of vocation which arises

from these schools being part of something greater, their local community and its parish church, and the wider, universal Church.

The Eucharist, this shared meal this morning, is also about belonging... belonging to a Church which is not just here but worldwide, and more than that, a Church which transcends time and even death. When we join together in the Eucharist we are declaring: we are the Body of Christ.

And so we drill down for a third and final time. The feeding of the Five Thousand has always been seen as more than providing for hungry people, important though that is. The ministry of Jesus is also about meeting deeper needs. What do we need to really fully live? We need love, we need acceptance, we need forgiveness when we mess up, we need hope to see beyond this messy present to something more in line with what we know, deep in our hearts, to be a better way of living and living together.

This is what we are offered in this sacrament of Holy Communion. The feeding of the Five Thousand foreshadowed the Eucharist, which was instituted at the Last Supper. That was a communal meal between friends, but so much more. It was a Passover meal, recalling the escape of the People of Israel from slavery in Egypt. And connecting to the past, even reliving it, is often a part of eating together. And it was the time when Jesus promised them, and us, that when we come together to share in this special meal, remembering him, he will be there amongst us.

We have many needs, many needs beyond our need for physical food. To lift our hands to receive “the Body of Christ” is to admit our need, our inadequacy, our inability to sort ourselves out alone. But it is also to open ourselves to the One who wants to fill us with his love. And it also needs our commitment to go back, to go out, to build a world where all people are fed, fed with the food which keeps them alive, and fed with the Bread of Life which tells them they are truly loved.