



Food: The Heart of the Gospel

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Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

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In the name of God, Creating, Redeeming and Giving us Life. Amen.

I was once in a church, a progressive church as it happens, who like us always reverently carried the bible to the centre of the church for the reading of the gospel. On the week I was there, it just so happened that at the conclusion of the gospel reading, as the bible was being carried back up the aisle, a voice which spoke just a little too loudly was heard to say, "I don't know why they make such a fuss about that book, it's not like anyone here believes in it!"

I think that was something of a harsh call, but the memory of it does make me laugh. For better or worse the Bible remains the mostly widely translated and reproduced book in history. And no matter what your relationship to that book is, it is a foundational text for those who are part of the Christian tradition, and as such is something we continue to wrestle with week in and week out. But today I want to start with another book the third most widely reproduced book in the world. Any guesses what that book might be?

Believe it or not, Harry Potter and the bible have more in common than you might think. In fact, as I read the gospel passage for this morning the first connection I made was to think of an extract from chapter seven of the first Harry Potter book, which I will read from in a moment.

For those of you who haven't engaged with the third most widely read book in history, or seen one of the movies, the story of Harry Potter begins with Harry as a young orphan. He lives with his Aunt and her husband and son. This is not a loving nurturing environment. Harry is an unwanted burden, forced to grow up in an uncaring environment. Harry's fortunes soon change as he approaches the beginning of secondary school. Harry discovers that as a child of parents who possessed magical

abilities, he is entitled to go to a very special boarding school: Hogwarts school of witchcraft and wizardry.

When Harry arrives at the school it is a great voyage of discovery as he steps out of his awful family environment and into a world where anything seems possible. One of the first ways this contrast becomes clear is in the way Harry experiences food.

As soon as Harry is away from his family, he encounters a world of culinary delight. It begins on the train trip to his new school where his newly made friend introduces him to chocolate frogs, and every flavour beans. Then shortly after his arrival at Hogwarts, there is a feast, something that becomes a constant theme throughout all of the Harry Potter novels.

“Harry’s mouth fell open. The dishes in front of him were now piled with food. He had never seen so many things he liked to eat on one table: roast beef, roast chicken, pork chops and lamb chops, sausages, bacon and steak, boiled potatoes, roast potatoes, chips, Yorkshire pudding, peas, carrots, gravy, ketchup and, for some strange reason, mint humbugs.”

The story goes on to tell us, that while Harry hadn’t been starved by his family, he wasn’t exactly provided for either. In this way, food conveys a deeper meaning within the story. The abundance of food that enters Harry’s life tells us that he is moving into a place of opportunity, a place of community, of warmth and acceptance and more fundamentally of love.

The sharing of any meal, communicates much more than basic nutritional information. Although that said, the fact that we all share a basic need to eat is where the significance of a meal begins. Gathering with others, sharing, talking and eating all carry meanings of belonging, identity, acceptance and even embrace. Meals are a place where conflict can be aired and resolved. Meals can be a place where power dynamics and hierarchy can be set aside, in favour of our basic shared humanity.

It is no small wonder that Jesus based his entire ministry around eating and drinking. John Dominic Crossan points out that throughout the gospel Jesus repeats a particular pattern when it comes to meals. Over

and over again he takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and shares it. Jesus does this at shared meals, but also at the feeding of the multitude, the last supper and even in the resurrection narratives such as the Emmaus Road story. Crossan argues that this repetition is utterly intentional. Jesus took break, broke and shared it time and again because this pattern was a symbolic representation of much of his teaching. For Jesus the sharing of a meal represented a great deal about the world, not as the world is, but how it could be.

We know that there are those who have much and those who have little. That is the way of the world. Worse still, many of us appreciate that the places in the world that enjoy the greatest affluence often do so at the expense of developing or undeveloped nations. This was no different two thousand years ago. For example, the wealth and affluence of Rome, one of the great centres of ancient civilisation, was actually due to their ongoing conquest of surrounding countries. The poverty of Palestine in the time of Christ was intensified by Roman rule.

In this context the feeding ministry of Jesus was something of a political statement. In a world where daily bread was not guaranteed to every person, Jesus showed his followers that by sharing what they had with each other, all were able to have their needs met. In fact, there was more than enough, but to find that abundance the community had to gather together and share what they had for the benefit of all.

In this way Jesus was suggesting an alternative vision of the world. Instead of a world where some had too much and others not enough, Jesus suggested that by committing ourselves to upholding the wellbeing of others as well as our own, the world can become a place of abundance for all. It is actually a very basic, primal message: where there is food, there is life. Without food, life is impossible. It is that deep reality that we should be aware of when we pray, give us today our daily bread.

We find ourselves living at a time when average household wages not kept up with inflation. In that time household costs have continued to increase. In particular, the cost of food continues to increase. I'm sure you've noticed that money just doesn't go as far at the supermarket as it used to, I certainly have. As a Christian community, a community that

celebrates a symbolic meal during which we affirm the right of all people to gather at God's table and receive their fill, are we ready to think about the reality of food in our world? Calling our present circumstances, the cost-of-living crisis, sanitises what is really happening for a lot of people. Homes, utilities, and food cost more than they ever have. Poverty is on the rise.

In one of our readings last week, we were reminded that saying to a starving person, go and eat all you desire, is a completely pointless exercise unless we are willing to give them something to eat. Faith without works is dead. And yet that hypothetical biblical scenario is not actually a hypothetical for an increasing number of people in our community. As people of the meal, are we prepared to reassert the basic right of all people to eat and eat well?

Let me make that challenge a little easier to respond to. Every week, as we prepare the table for the Eucharist, we bring up a basket of food. In the week following that food is taken to our neighbours at Auckland city mission. They are one of the most significant providers of food parcels in our country, and their government funding for that work has recently been cut. They will be reducing the number of food parcels they give out from 50,000 to 20,000, at a time when demand has never been higher. What if in the coming weeks, in the middle of this very wet winter, that basket of food which we place before our altar, becomes so full that it becomes difficult to carry? That would be a start. Amen.