

4. Bread of Life: Kingdom Food

Bible Passages:

Hosea 2:18-23

¹⁸ In that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the creatures that move along the ground. Bow and sword and battle I will abolish from the land, so that all may lie down in safety. ¹⁹ I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. ²⁰ I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the Lord. ²¹ “In that day I will respond,” declares the Lord - “I will respond to the skies, and they will respond to the earth; ²² and the earth will respond to the grain, the new wine and the olive oil, and they will respond to Jezreel. ²³ I will plant her for myself in the land; I will show my love to the one I called ‘Not my loved one.’ I will say to those called ‘Not my people,’ ‘You are my people’; and they will say, ‘You are my God.’”

John 6: 5-12 and 48-51

⁵ When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” ⁶ He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. ⁷ Philip answered him, “It would take more than half a year’s wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!” ⁸ Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, spoke up, ⁹ “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?” ¹⁰ Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). ¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. ¹² When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, “Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.”

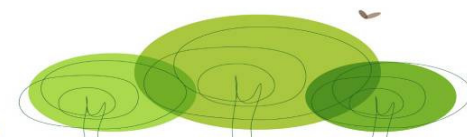
⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. ⁵⁰ But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

Summary:

This week we’re getting practical! We’re reminded of how our current food system leads to a breakdown in relationships, before looking at the vision of Hosea 2:18-23 – of harmony and restored relationships throughout creation. Two marks of this:

- An end to violence
- New values – righteousness and justice, love and compassion

Today’s 5-minute video shows four practical examples from around the UK. Two are summarised below for those who can’t show a video in church. Finally, a reflection on Jesus feeding the 5,000 reminds us of how he can transform our tiny contributions in a miraculous way, and also of how he cared that ‘nothing should be wasted’ – a value we need to recover in our relationship with food.



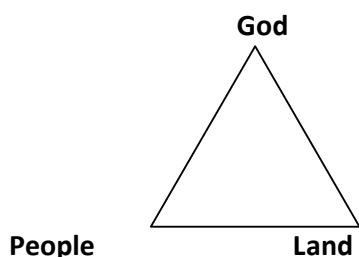
Introduction:

The biblical scholar, Dr Ellen Davis says this: “Almost all Israelites were farmers, and almost all of us are not, at least in the fully industrialised West. But all of us eat, and shockingly, that is probably the single most destructive thing we do on a daily basis. For we are enmeshed in a catastrophic food production system.”¹

As we have seen in this sermon series, there are huge problems with our current food system, leading to poor health, exploitation of poor farmers and food growers, and destruction of God’s creation. According to the 2005 United Nations-sponsored Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, agriculture as currently practiced may constitute the “largest threat to biodiversity and ecosystem function of any single human activity.”²

Today we’re going to seek a different vision. As Christians we are called to be counter-cultural, to live out a set of values inspired not by what is cheapest but by a vision of God’s coming Kingdom. Throughout the Bible there are visions of a different way of being – of a better, fairer, more peaceful world. Our Old Testament reading from Hosea 2 is one of these visions. Look at what it contains:

At the heart of it is a restoration of the three-way relationship between God, people and land. In week 2 we looked at how sin has broken the intimacy and harmony that links God with his creation, and that links people with the land and its creatures. This was seen in how Adam and Eve were thrown out of Eden, and in the curse which followed whereby the land would now produce thorns and thistles. What we see here in Hosea is a vision of that curse removed, of a restored harmony in relationships and a renewed responsiveness between God, people and land.

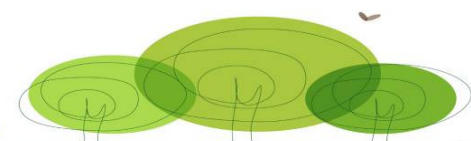


The passage talks of a new ‘covenant’ – God’s unilateral promise that invites a response. It is a covenant not just with people but with the whole creation. “In that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the creatures that move along the ground” (v.18). As at the time of Noah, when God sent the rainbow it was a covenant with people and with every living creature on the earth. Here too is a profound reminder that our salvation and the future of the earth and its creatures are deeply connected in God’s plans.

This new covenant leads to a renewed responsiveness in nature. Whereas the curse meant thorns and thistles, creation groaning, God’s vision in Hosea 2:21-22 is of all the broken lines of

¹ Ellen F. Davis, “A Living Creature: A Biblical Perspective on Land Care and Use”, p.3 (copy included in this pack)

² Quoted in Ellen F. Davis, op. cit.



communication being restored. “In that day I will respond,” declares the Lord - “I will respond to the skies, and they will respond to the earth; and the earth will respond to the grain, the new wine and the olive oil, and they will respond to Jezreel.” The name Jezreel means ‘God sows’ and refers to his people. The vision is almost of a chain reaction flowing from the heart of God. As he responds to creation’s groaning, first the sky, then the earth, then its fruit and its harvests all respond in turn – and people are blessed as a part of this new harmonious ecosystem.

We could easily see Hosea 2, and the many other bible passages that envision God’s Kingdom – lions lying down with lambs, children playing safely with snakes - as either symbolic or about some future reality but totally unrealistic for today. However, Jesus was clear that the Kingdom of God has a toe-hold in the real world of today. His miracles of healing, and of transforming creation - turning water into wine, calming the storm, making a few loaves and fish feed 5,000+ people – were all signs of the Kingdom – pointers in real people, real places and real time towards a greater reality that is still to come. Jesus talked of the Kingdom being ‘within you’ and ‘among you’ - not just in the future but very clearly here and now. To Jesus, the Kingdom was about God’s future breaking into the here and now. It was about stories and miracles that brought transformation and surprise, about a whole different set of values to be practised right now.

Those Kingdom values are not found in earthly kings but in the person of Jesus. He is the ‘bread of life’ ... the ‘living bread’ who comes down from heaven and gives his life for the life of the world. So, as we think about food – and about bringing Jesus’ Kingdom values into our food system, what practical help can the vision of the Kingdom glimpsed in Hosea 2 give us today? I want to suggest just two:

- A commitment to end violence – In Hosea 2:18 God says “Bow and sword and battle I will abolish from the land, so that all may lie down in safety.” Today’s global market-driven food system is based on violence. That may sound rather strong, but think for a moment. Factory-farmed chickens and intensively-reared pigs are treated violently in their living and in their dying. Intensively-grown crops rely on pesticides which do real violence to natural ecosystems and systematically reduce biodiversity. Moreover, our industrial food system indirectly leads to considerable human violence. It is reliant on oil-based fertilisers and on global market forces. As oil becomes more expensive and more unreliable, and as commodity speculators cause food prices to rise dramatically, that leads inevitably to food riots around the world. Oil, climate change, uncertain harvests work together to cause conflicts in developing countries and to increase migration to western nations. Many of today’s wars are, at least in some sense, due to our global food system and the insecurities and injustices it causes
- More positively though, Hosea 2 also gives us a new set of values to replace the barren values of efficiency, speed and cheapness – these values include, in verse 19, “righteousness and justice ... love and compassion”. We need to work towards a food system that encourages righteousness and justice for people – locally and globally, and love and compassion for animals and for the land.

Today, an increasing number of people are beginning to do that. Many are not Christians, but are



deeply concerned about the injustices and exploitation in our current system. Some are motivated by saving money – through growing their own food. Some want to reconnect with the land. Others are going organic because of fears for the health of their children. Amongst this growing movement (literally!) are many Christians motivated by a desire to seek God's Kingdom values. Let's look at a few stories:

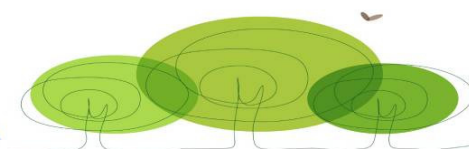
SHOW VIDEO of programme 4. If it is not possible to show video, then use the following two stories from the video:

Will Campbell-Clause works as Young Adults Coordinator for A Rocha UK. Along with some friends he moved into a flat on a housing estate in Camberwell, South London. It's an estate of tower-blocks and flats with almost no green space, and they felt God challenging them. Will says: "We felt really led by God to get involved in starting up a garden project on the estate. And it's just been amazing how the residents have really loved that and wanted to get behind it and see the estate improved." They persuaded the local council to dig up a derelict area of concrete to make the garden, and as Will says: "The vision is to transform it into this beautiful, productive garden, which has got olive trees growing in it, apple trees and pear trees, and raised beds with vegetables and herbs, so that the community can all share in the produce, and also it can act as a catalyst to show how easy it is to grow your own veg and fruit at home." It has become a project that has not only helped renew creation, but also renew the community – and Will would say that growing food and getting close to the land has affected him spiritually: "Food growing and working with the soil has had a huge effect on my relationship with God. I love it, and it's made me understand God's love, and love people and love creation so much more too."

In a totally different context, Ruth Valerio, who now runs A Rocha UK's Living Lightly programme, jokes about how, 10 or 15 years ago she thought growing food was 'just really sad' but how God challenged her with a vision of his Kingdom. Like most of us, Ruth was very busy – working part-time, bringing up two young children, studying part-time, and also on a very low income, but gradually growing food has transformed her lifestyle and her life. Along with two friends she runs an allotment. She also now rears pigs – again sharing the work with others, and helps run a food cooperative to order-in ethical and fair-trade food that she can't grow herself. She says this: "I've just been trying to find as many ways as possible to produce, rear, make my own food, so that I'm not dependent on the supermarkets, and not dependent on rubbish, cheap food in the way that I was 15-20 years ago ... and all over the country, people are coming up with different creative ways. So let's find out about them and try some of them out for ourselves."

Not all of us may be able to grow food – although even if it's a window-box with a few herbs it is worth a go. However all of us can see food differently – recognising once again that it is a precious gift of God. We can all seek God's values of righteousness and justice in terms of what we buy and how it's produced. We can seek to ensure that everything in our shopping baskets and fridges has been treated with love and compassion. As we do that we actually begin to live out what it means to be the Kingdom of God in the here and now.

Jesus & the Feeding of the Five Thousand



Let's conclude with a reflection on our Gospel reading from John 6 – Jesus the bread of life. Jesus' disciples were increasingly worried about how they were going to feed what seemed a massive crowd of over 5,000. Today we live in a world where the population is expected to top seven billion during 2011, and many are worried about how we can feed the world. The disciples' first instinct was to think in practical business-like terms. How much of a year's salary would it take to feed that number, and anyway where would they find shops to cope with such a large order? For us too, there's nothing wrong with thinking practically about today's food crises, but notice how Jesus' approach - infused by his Kingdom values - is different. Instead of being swamped with the size of the problem – as we often are – he starts with something very small, very local and very possible – the five little loaves and two small fish that were available. It seemed small, it seemed insignificant next to the scale of the problem ... but as Jesus gave thanks to God and broke the bread, a miracle happened, and there was abundant food for all to eat.

Perhaps there's a lesson here about tackling global poverty. According to the UN and other agencies, it's not large-scale agro-business that will effectively feed the world long-term. It's the small-scale, local bread and fish of ordinary farmers around the world. However, there's also a profound lesson for us as we look at what we can each do about food. The difference we make may seem small and insignificant, a drop in the ocean, but that's not how God's Kingdom works. Tiny things – mustard seeds, yeast, grains of salt, a few loaves and fishes – can grow until they transform the whole world. What we do – in our shopping, our food growing, our choices about what we eat and how we eat – matter greatly in terms of God's Kingdom. If we give our little bit to God with thanksgiving, he can transform it.

And did you notice what Jesus does at the end of the story? After everybody has eaten their fill he says: "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." Let nothing be wasted! There's a slogan for us, in a country where over 30% of all food we buy gets thrown away, where – if you include everything the supermarkets reject as mis-shapen or dispose of because it's just beyond a sell-by date – Britain is throwing away half of all the food grown on farms³. As Archbishop Rowan Williams said in his 2007 New Year message, "God doesn't do waste".⁴ In nature everything gets used and recycled. If we are to glorify God in how we eat then we need to cut right down on the waste – in our bins, in our shops, in our countryside, and in the lives of both people and animals.

Finally, if we want our relationship with food to be one that truly reflects the values of Jesus and his Kingdom, we need to remember that ultimately he himself is the bread of life. The food that nourishes us daily is God's good gift and is to be received with thankfulness. Yet we soon become hungry again. There is a deeper hunger that only Jesus himself can satisfy. Whilst we work for a just-food system and revel in the enjoyment of taste and texture and variety that God gives us through food, all of these things pale before the wonder and beauty that God himself has stepped into this world in the person of Jesus, and a life centred on him is the only life that will satisfy our deepest hunger. Jesus said: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven.

³ Lord Haskins, former head of Northern Foods, Independent on Sunday, 2nd March 2008

⁴ www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1374



Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” (John 6:51)

Watch: “Bread of Life”

Five minute Video with Jeremy Williams, Ruth Valerio, Anne Bookless, Professor Michael Northcott and Rev Alex Smeed.

