

1. All Good Gifts Around Us: Celebrating Food

Bible Passages:

Genesis 1: 26-31

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." ²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ²⁸ God blessed them and said to them,

"Be fruitful and increase in number;
fill the earth and subdue it.
Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky
and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

²⁹ Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. ³⁰ And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground — everything that has the breath of life in it - I give every green plant for food." And it was so. ³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning - the sixth day.

John 2:1-11

¹ On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, ² and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³ When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."

⁴ "Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come."

⁵ His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

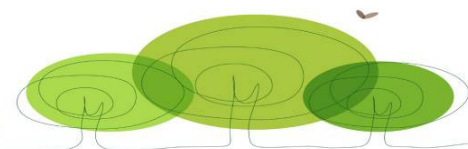
⁶ Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. ⁷ Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. ⁸ Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." They did so, ⁹ and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside ¹⁰ and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."

¹¹ What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Summary:

Four values to cultivate as we look at food biblically:

- Celebration - God has made a wide variety of delicious, diverse and bizarre-looking foods to excite our taste buds, bring people together and sustain us physically.
- Abundance – the fantastic fruitfulness of the earth. God's creativity shown in creation, and God's gift of creativity in how we prepare and present food.
- Dependence – on God, the land, each other
- Community / Relationship – food is best eaten together.



Introduction:

Think about a significant meal you shared over the past year with a group of friends or family. What was the atmosphere like round the table, what were the tastes, smells, sights and sounds that you remember?

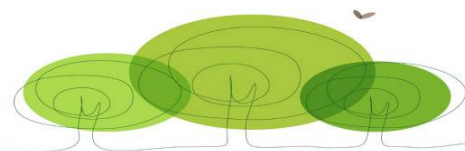
The way we approach food has changed dramatically over the past few decades. Today we are overwhelmed with food choices that our grandparents never knew. In our fast food, season-less cooking culture, less and less time is being spent on preparing food and eating together. In many ways, food is now widely seen as just another commodity to be purchased and consumed. But food has the capacity to bring amazing unity, build relationships and to slow us down in the hectic nature of our day-to-day lives! As Christians we need to re-discover food as God's gift to be celebrated and consumed in the right way, in healthy quantities and in community.

It is no coincidence that the central Christian sacrament is a meal, bringing joy and community to the body of Christ. God knows that meals have the power to bring incredible unity! For example, preparing and sharing a meal with others can bridge cultural and racial divisions and dissolve simmering tensions. Has anyone heard Isak Dinesen's (Karen Blixen's pseudonym) story of *Babette's Feast*? Set in an impoverished village in Norway, a Lutheran community is run in a very controlling, soulless way. All wore black and their diet consisted of boiled cod and gruel made from boiling bread in water. One day a French chef, a lady called Babette, arrives at their doorstep with no money and works for them to twelve years in return for bed and board. Over the years, the community becomes increasingly broken, riddled with resentments and distrust. One day, Babette discovers she has won the lottery – ten thousand francs, and unbeknown to the community decides to spend her entire winnings on treating the Lutheran sect to a lavish French feast with the finest food one can imagine! As the divided community eat together, a brother who had cheated another on a business deal confesses, two women who had not spoken since a dispute two years before find themselves talking and laughing, and the community grows together again! Celebrating and sharing food together is wonderfully powerful! What a gift from God. Have any of you had times where you have had an argument with someone and sharing food has helped the reconciliation, or helped you to find common ground with someone with whom you may not have much in common?

Our bible passages today focus on food as God's gift in creation, and how central a role it plays in our relationship with God and each other.

1. CELEBRATION - There are numerous stories in the Bible where food is seen as a sign of celebration. In Genesis 1: 26-31, God speaks of his food plan for creation as being 'very good'. "Every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it" is to be "ours for food", and to "everything that has the breath of life in it" he has given "every green plant for food." This food is to be celebrated as a wonderful gift and received daily with deep gratitude.

This joyous celebration that God associates with food can also be seen in Jesus' turning water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana. It's hugely significant that Jesus' very first miracle – a sign of his Kingdom values – is a celebration around good food and good drink. Life with God is to be



a party, and all the best parties have great food.

There's a challenge here about our worship and our church meals. Sometimes church meals can be limp lettuce, cold quiche and cliques who only talk to each other. What we see in the Bible are over-the-top celebrations of God and his overflowing goodness. Perhaps Babette's Feast has something to teach us!

2. ABUNDANCE - Alongside celebration, the bible speaks of abundance in relation to food. God doesn't just give us a small helping – he provides plenty. When Jesus turns water into wine, he doesn't ration everybody to a ½ glass of cheap plonk. Instead, if we calculate the size of the stone water jars he makes about 150 gallons of top quality Chateau Cana. This isn't the time or place to get into a debate on temperance. The point is that God provides food and drink abundantly and generously.

The same principle is seen again and again in the Gospels. When feeding the 5,000 God in Jesus provides abundantly – there are 12 baskets left over. When, in John 21, Jesus instructs his disciples to cast their net on the other side of the boat, they suddenly catch hundreds of fish, far more than they need. Or again, we can see God's abundant provision in the Return of the Prodigal Son. The Father throws a huge over-the-top feast with a fattened calf, celebrating his son's return. As Acts 14:17 says, God "provides us with plenty of food and fills our hearts with joy."

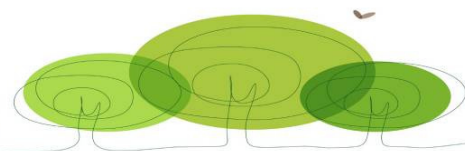
As we will see in future weeks, God's over-flowing abundance in giving us food does not mean we are to be careless and wasteful. Rather we are to be generous and fulsome in how we eat together.

3. DEPENDENCE – The way most of us live today in western cultures can give us the false impression that we are self-sufficient – and food is part of the problem here. If we want something we can simply go and get it. Whatever our food craving, however unseasonal it is, we can usually find it in the supermarket. However bad the weather is, whether it's drought or flood locally ... the shelves are full and we can eat what we want when we want it. It's therefore very easy to forget how dependent we are on nature – and on God's provision through nature.

How different life is for most people around the world. If the rains don't come or if there are floods, food simply doesn't grow and people go hungry. Today with uncertain weather patterns causing chaos in the global environment, this is happening more and more. Food riots are becoming more common. Food security is moving up the global agenda. Real questions are being asked about how we will be able to feed a world population that is now 7 billion and may reach more than 10 billion mid-century.

We are not alone – we are connected in a food web with each other – especially with those whose hard work gives us our food; we are connected to the land – dependent upon its fruitfulness, and we are connected to God, who gives the growth.

We need to rediscover a healthy sense of dependence. We need food. We depend completely on a fertile, healthy and stable environment to produce it. Throughout the Bible there are constant reminders that food is from God – it is not something we've produced. In Genesis 1 God says "I **give** every green plant for food." Without that giving, without God who provides the conditions



for growth, we would have no food at all. Food is a gift of grace ... which is why saying 'grace' before meals is actually one of the most important things we can do – to acknowledge and celebrate our dependence – upon God, upon the land, and upon all those who grow and prepare food for us.

4. COMMUNITY – Finally, food builds community. Surveys show that most households eat together less and less often. What does that say about how we value food, and how we value each other? Back in the 1990s, the Oprah Winfrey show in the USA did a Family Dinner Experiment, where five families who previously ate whenever they felt like it, agreed to eat together each evening – sitting around a table for a minimum of ½ hour. Everybody kept a journal, and the reactions - right across the ages - changed during the month from resentment and impatience to looking forward to time together. By the end, all the families had resolved to continue eating together regularly, and the children and teenagers who took part expressed appreciation of the guaranteed quality time this gave them with their parents. Other surveys have shown that children in households who eat together regularly do considerably better at school – and that this is consistent across ethnic and social strata, and statistically more significant than whether there is one parent or two in the family. Eating together matters!¹

It's not just in the family. Churches that eat together regularly are much less likely to become cliques. Shared meals are one reason for the huge success of the Alpha Course – inviting people to good food is much better than inviting people just to talk. There is something very powerful about sitting around a table sharing good food – something that encourages people to come out of their shells and open up to each other. And beyond our church communities, more and more Christians are becoming involved in food-growing and food-sharing projects – feeding the hungry, sharing skills. We'll explore some of these more in weeks to come.

Eating together – building community around shared food - is a value that has become important to A Rocha as a Christian movement caring for creation. In most A Rocha centres, everything stops for food at lunchtime. Rather than people bringing their own cold sandwiches and disappearing off into corners to eat them, there is a cooked meal to which everybody is invited – visitors, volunteers, team members. These meal-times become celebrations of life, with abundant food shared together. Sometimes it's a struggle to get back to the office afterwards!

So, in conclusion, as we begin this series on food let's relearn how to value God's gift. Let us learn again to **celebrate** the wide variety of delicious, diverse and bizarre-looking foods God has made to excite our taste buds, bring people together and sustain us physically. Let us rejoice in the **abundance** of God's world - the fantastic fruitfulness of the earth. Let us recover our sense of **dependence** – on God, the land, and each other, and let us restore our broken relationships as we build **community** around sharing food.

Watch: "All Good Gifts around us"

Five Minute Video with Brother Sam, Will Campbell-Clause, Alex Smeed & Anne Bookless

Action suggestions:

Personal level: resolve to say grace / thankyou to God before every meal

Church and Community Level: plan church meals that reflect these values

Political level: look at Government food and farming policy in the light of biblical values

