

3. Just Food: Eat LESS

Bible Passages:

1 Corinthians 10:23-31

²³ “I have the right to do anything,” you say - but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right to do anything” - but not everything is constructive. ²⁴ No one should seek their own good, but the good of others. ²⁵ Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, ²⁶ for, “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.” ²⁷ If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. ²⁸ But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, both for the sake of the one who told you and for the sake of conscience. ²⁹ I am referring to the other person’s conscience, not yours. For why is my freedom being judged by another’s conscience? ³⁰ If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for? ³¹ So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

Luke 4:14-21

¹⁴ Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. ¹⁵ He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. ¹⁶ He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹ He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

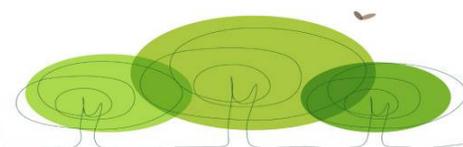
Summary:

In the light of our current food system’s problems, we look at a ‘just food’ system with the Bible’s help. One mnemonic to help is ‘Eat LESS’. Not only is this about reducing quantities of food and waste, but about eating food that is:

- Local
- Ethical
- Seasonal
- Slow

Introduction:

Last week we looked at the ways in which our systems of food production are fracturing relationships throughout creation. As a result we live in a distorted, imbalanced world – where often the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, and nature gets more and more degraded and depleted.



Today we are going to re-imagine this structure and look towards a 'just food' system. The Bible, from start to end, proclaims a God of justice who defends the poor, the oppressed and the disadvantaged. When Jesus began his ministry, he stood up in the synagogue in Nazareth and read words from Isaiah – which he applied to himself. They were words that confirmed his ministry was to focus on bringing in God's Kingdom rule of justice:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.”

Today our concept of justice needs to include justice for all creation. Theologian and ethicist Michael Northcott argues that biblical justice is always rooted ecologically rather than just socially¹. To put it another way, we cannot proclaim good news to the poor unless we have healthy balanced eco-systems. It is the poor who suffer first and worst when our misuse of creation leads to environmental disasters, and it is the poor who are most immediately dependent on the weather, the crops, the streams and the forests. More than that, though, the biblical concept of God's peaceable kingdom – the vision of shalom and peace – is one where humanity and nature live in harmony. God's justice requires us to have a vision that includes justice for the poor within a bigger vision of the healing of all creation.

So, in our present agricultural climate, where food is cheaper than ever, access to good food is more unequal than ever and where there is more food waste than ever before, how can we embody kingdom relationships with regard to food? How can we (to adapt Paul's words in Romans 12:1-2) be transformed by the renewing of our minds and resist conforming to worldly patterns in our relationship with food?

As we are made in the image of God, our responsibility is to protect, nurture and uphold all the delicate ecological relationships throughout creation, remembering that “the earth is the Lord's” (Psalm 24:1) and He cares intimately for all He has made. Food is the area in which individually we have the most significant positive or negative environmental impact, so let's explore the idea of a 'just food' system and approach food in a way that reflects our Creator.

The Context:

As Shane Claiborne, author of *The Irresistible Revolution*, has said, “another world is possible, another world is necessary, another world is here”². We can live out kingdom food relationships in the here and now, learning to eat 'our daily bread' mindfully, and with gratitude, supporting and encouraging a 'just food' culture. Perhaps our motto should be Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 10:31 “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”

There are various helpful ways to remember the different elements of a 'just food' approach. The one we're going to look at here follows the motto EAT LESS.

EAT LESS is partly a reminder that in today's western culture most of us are eating more than is good for us. Of course that's not true for everybody. One of the consequences of our current distorted food system is that it pushes people towards unhealthy extremes in their relationship with food. At one extreme, eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa now affect about 1% of

¹ M. Northcott, 'A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming', DLT, 2007, p,164

² Shane Claiborne, 'The Irresistible Revolution – Living as an Ordinary Radical', Zondervan, 2006



young women aged 15-30 in Britain³. Clearly a message about 'eat less' is not for those who are battling with a compulsion to get thinner and thinner. However, a far larger problem (literally!) is at the other extreme. According to the latest NHS statistics for England, 66% of men and 57% of women are either clinically obese or overweight. For children aged 2-15 roughly 30% of boys and girls are obese or overweight⁴. All of this in a world where over a billion people go hungry each day and many countries are suffering from food shortages. As a whole our society needs to eat less.

However, EAT LESS, also spells out four principles we can all apply to our use of food:

L = local
E = ethical
S = seasonal
S = slow!

Let's look at each of these in turn ...

1. LOCAL

The food industry today has become more and more globalised, cutting us off from any kind of relationship with the people and places that produce our food. The shrink-wrapped, processed products we buy are more and more anonymous. Often they say 'produce of more than one country' which tells us nothing – not even how many 1000 food miles have gone into the meal on our plate. Even when we know which part of the world our food comes from we've no idea about the people who grew the ingredients, the conditions they worked in, or the impact of the food on the local environment.

We can begin to rebuild those broken relationships by aiming to use as much local produce as possible.

- Where possible we can grow our own food. There is nothing more inspiring than eating something that you have planted, watered and watched. And it's biblical to grow our own! When the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon, a long way from home – and feeling a long way from God – the first thing that God asked them to do was to "plant gardens and eat what they produced" (Jeremiah 29:4). There is something fundamental about being in touch with creation through growing food – something that encourages a sense of dependence and interdependence, of thankfulness and appreciation. Let's learn from our Creator and embrace the joys of growing food, avoiding packaging, composting our food waste and perhaps getting hold of a wormery to break down our old food and turn it into incredibly nutritious fertiliser for our plants!
- We can also buy locally-grown produce. Obviously not everybody can be self-sufficient, but we can seek to support local farmers, and food-producers. Supporting farmer's markets is one excellent way of doing this. Some churches have now become involved in organising and running farmers markets – seeing this as something that both embodies Christian values and connects them more deeply with local people.
- The reasons for growing our own food and shopping locally are many. It connects

³ Statistics from MIND, found at <http://accommodations.org/index.php/anorexia-nervosa>

⁴ Statistics on Obesity, Physical Activity and Diet: England, 2010, NHS Information Centre - <http://www.ic.nhs.uk/pubs/opad10>



us more with creation and with the people who produce our food. It helps us understand the stories Jesus told – many of which are rooted in sowing and harvesting. We're more likely to be aware of the pressures farmers and others are under when they are people we meet. Local food also reduces 'food-miles' – the energy wasted in transporting foodstuffs huge distances, with the carbon-cost that entails. On top of that, locally-produced food is more likely to be fresh – tasting far better and actually retaining its nutrients.

2. ETHICAL

PowerPoint slide illustrating quiz. The various ethical standards:

Know your labels



Freedom Food: UK farm assurance scheme for higher livestock welfare standards, independently assessed by the RSPCA. www.rspca.org.uk/freedomfood



Red Tractor: Checks that UK farm produce (meat, poultry and dairy) meet basic standards of safety, hygiene, welfare and environmental good practice. www.redtractor.org.uk



Marine Stewardship Council: Eco-label certifying the fish comes from a fishery that has been independently assessed as sustainable. www.msc.org



Organic: There are several organic certifications, but the most widespread is the Soil Association's. Organic food has to meet legal environmental and high animal welfare standards. www.soilassociation.org



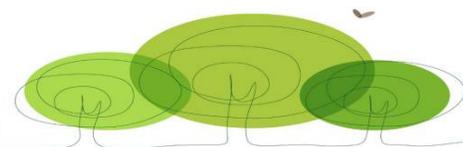
Fairtrade: Ensures that farmers and workers in poor countries have good working conditions, work in co-operatives, receive a fair price for what they produce and a premium to invest in social projects. www.fairtrade.org.uk



Rainforest Alliance: Promotes environmental standards that conserve wildlife and habitats, and ensure reasonable working conditions for workers and their communities. www.rainforest-alliance.org

As our readings reminded us, God is passionate about justice. Today our global food system sadly embodies huge injustices. In the UK, some farmers are forced by powerful supermarkets to sell milk or lamb or pork for less than it costs to produce it. The same happens right around the world – our cheap food is paid for by back-breaking work by growers, farmers and packers in developing nations, or by migrant workers here in the UK exploited by corrupt gang-masters.

It's not only people who are exploited. By making profit margins the only consideration, our global food system has increased short-term agricultural productivity but at the expense of long-term sustainability. Pouring tonnes of oil-derived fertilisers onto the soil does increase crop yields, but what is the long-term price we pay? Chemical run-off that poisons rivers and deltas? Soil that loses the microscopic organisms that give it its underlying health, and then needs more



and more artificial inputs? What about the pesticides we add? They may prevent crops from being affected by insects or weeds and thus make it cheaper, but who pays the cost in terms of lost biodiversity, and the medical risks to human health?

If we really believe God is a God of justice, it should affect our shopping baskets. Many churches have taken the lead in the Fair Trade movement, and this is absolutely right. Guaranteeing a fair living wage and decent working conditions to those who produce coffee, tea, sugar, chocolate and now non-food items like gold, flowers and cotton, is something every Christian should seriously consider. The Fair Trade movement is something the Christian church in this country should rightly be proud of.

Yet eating just food goes beyond Fair Trade. If we want to avoid food that is sprayed with poisonous chemicals, or grown in barren monocultures where no wildlife lives, then we may want to consider organic food. Encouraging organic farms means healthier soil, water and wildlife, as well as healthier humans. Farming with natural fertilisers, such as manure, rather than energy intensive synthetic ones increase soil fertility, protect wildlife and reduce waste. Of course organic produce does cost more – because it is more labour intensive and because it doesn't try to squeeze every last ounce out of the soil, and also because non-organic intensive farming is heavily subsidised by the tax system. But if we eat less and waste less we may find we are able to afford better quality food. If we're on a tight budget then it's at least worth considering buying organic for those fruit and veg that have thinner skins and may absorb more pesticides⁵. In the Old Testament God told the people not to farm too intensively – but rather to leave field margins for the poor and for wildlife, and to let the land have its Sabbath rest every seventh year. When Jesus, in Luke 4, proclaimed 'the year of the Lord's favour', he was not only proclaiming justice for the poor and oppressed, but also God's favour on the land itself.

Eating ethically should mean we look at the way animals are treated too. Many have been shocked by recent TV documentaries looking at the conditions many chickens, turkeys, calves and pigs are reared in. Yet animals matter to God. He created them and declared them 'very good'. He asked Noah to save them from extinction on the Ark. And God calls us to care for the welfare of animals we eat too. As Proverbs 12:10 says, 'A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal.' Sometimes we can overlook the violence our industrialised meat system inflicts on animals. By eating factory-farmed animals, we endorse the systematic cruelty involved in this process and rather than reflecting the image of our creator, who loves all that He has made, we muddy God's image. Organic free-range animal products are pricey, so cutting down on our carnivorous lifestyles and eating more veggie food means that when we do buy animal produce, we can buy top-quality! Additionally, decreasing our meat consumption is a key way to cut carbon and enable food resources to be shared more justly. For example, it takes approximately 8 pounds of grain to produce 1 pound of beef! Just think how many more people we could feed on a more veggie diet!

3. SEASONAL

Of course all these ethical issues are very complex. When you're standing in the supermarket it's easy to be paralysed by indecision – Should I buy the FairTrade green beans that have been flown from Kenya, or the local veg from the farmer down the road, or the organic produce that's been driven half-way across Europe? That's why it's important not to beat ourselves up with guilt – the very fact that we are thinking about what we buy and eat is part of the solution, and all of us

⁵ There is an excellent balanced debate on Organic food on the website of the Royal Society of Chemistry - <http://www.rsc.org/Chemsoc/Chembytes/HotTopics/Organic/Index.asp>



have to make compromises at times. However, one thing that really helps is to eat more seasonal food.

If you want to eat strawberries in December you have to make a difficult ethical choice. Either you buy British or Dutch ones grow in heated greenhouses, or Spanish or Moroccan ones that have been transported a long distance. Both have a significant carbon footprint. Far better is to only buy strawberries when they are in season. It takes away many of the complex choices if eat only what's in season, and it also adds to variety and a sense of connection to nature.

God created a world that runs according to seasonal rhythms, and we are designed to live by those too. Spring and autumn, summer and winter. In our diets there should be times of waiting and anticipation and fasting, as well as times of plenty and celebration. Today we tend to expect whatever we want whenever we want it, but what that actually does is to destroy our sense of connection with the seasons. It also destroys any sense of something being really special, because we have waited for it. Most of all, seasonal food – because it is fresh and local – is more healthy and more tasty. Insipid supermarket tomatoes that have been refrigerated almost to freezing just can't compare with freshly-picked tomatoes bursting with fresh fruity flavour!

There are great books or websites such as eattheseasons.co.uk which will tell you what you can buy that is actually in season ... and of course growing it yourself is even better!

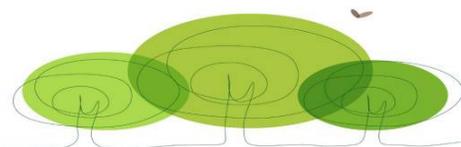
4. SLOW

Finally, eating slow food! What do we mean by that? Well slow food is the opposite of fast food. Fast food is grabbed and gobbled without enjoyment, without relishing the flavours or enjoying the textures. Fast food is often heavily processed –canned, dried, frozen, preserved, dehydrated and modified. Many processed foods contain high amounts of salt and saturated fats or trans-fats – which can lead to significant health problems.

Eating slow food turns our desire for speed and convenience on its head. It is about taking time over food – over choosing it, preparing it, eating it, and enjoying it with others. We are not simply machines that need refuelling. We are relational beings, who thrive on healthy relationships with each other and the earth. We are sensory beings who are stimulated by delicious tastes, smells, textures and sights. Fast food is ultimately ungrateful food because it takes God's provision for granted. It fails to be thankful for those who have produce and grown food.

We may complain that we live busy lives, but time spent on good food is never time wasted. It can help rebuild family life, it can be where friendships are forged, it can be where we learn to love God's creation again. Even if we begin with a couple of meals a week that we really slow down and take time over, we will find the experience hugely rewarding.

In the work of A Rocha, the Christian environmental organisation, food has become vitally important. A Rocha centres are often busy workplaces with phones ringing, keypads typing and meetings going on. But at lunchtime everything stops. Instead of people eating their sandwiches separately, there are communal cooked meals, where possible made from local ethically-sourced seasonal ingredients. Team members from secretaries to Directors to finance officers take turns in preparing, cooking and washing up. Grace is said before eating, and everybody is welcomed around the common table. As that happens, Jesus is welcomed too and becomes a natural part



of the conversation.

In conclusion, we may feel that we're trapped in a system where the cheapest food is the worst food for our health, for the world's poor and for animals, but the fact is we do have a choice! Every single time a scanner reads the bar-code on a food item you buy, you are casting a vote. The supermarkets only stock what the public wants. We need to vote with our food choices ... and change will come.

Ultimately, what we eat and how we eat it is a matter of choice. But, as our reading from 1 Corinthians 10 put it: "I have the right to do anything, but not everything is beneficial" (v.23). We can make choices not to simply "seek our own good but the good of others" (v.25). So, let us learn to envision and enact a 'just food' system, and as we do we will be living out the values of God's Kingdom.

Let us learn to EAT LESS – both literally as a society, but also through eating local, ethical, seasonal food that slows us down and gives us time for what is really important. In the end it is relationships that matter most – with God, others and creation. To end with the last verse of our reading from 1 Corinthians: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

Watch: "Just Food"

Five minute Video with Will Campbell-Clause, Kailean Khongsai, Ruth Valerio and Anne Bookless

