



Bristol Cathedral

A Sermon preached at Eucharist 6th October 2013

By the Dean

Harvest (John 6:26-9)

Years ago, at Magdalene, I used to stay in college for dinner. Late at night I would sweep home, awash in opinion and Chateau Potensac 1980. Mrs. Hoyle would have had a quiet night in: some work she had brought home, a scrambled egg. Polite, to a fault though, she would always ask what I had had for dinner. There was an unfortunate night we both remember, I scowled at her and said 'Dreadful, dreadful, would you believe we had venison *again*'.

Dinner in Magdalene was a risky business. A Cambridge high table thinks conversation is a blood sport. Worse than that, as you looked over the cream jugs, the butter swirls and the dessert wine you could hear the arteries hardening. Not one, but two, of Magdalene's heads of house actually died *at* the dinner table. The college motto is Norman French: *Garde ta foy*, loosely translated as 'watch your liver'.

We notice the excess, (Mrs Hoyle noticed the excess), but do we notice something else? Food is power. What we eat says something about who we are. After the Battle of Hastings in 1066, we got a new government and a new language, Norman French became the official language in this country. We still have that legacy - our words *crown, throne, court, duke, baron, servant*, are Norman French, so are *govern, authority, obedience and traitor*. And, after the conquest, the lowly English looked after the animals, so we have English words for *cow, ox, sheep* and *pig*. But, the ruling French ate the meat so we have French words for the food: *beef, mutton, veal, venison*, and *pork*.

We use food to celebrate. It's how we offer hospitality. It's the sacrament of family and friendship. So in our minds, food is comforting. It is a pledge of loyalty and commitment: the Christmas turkey, a wedding cake, a harvest lunch. But if I eat differently from you – if I have venison when you get scrambled egg; if I eat at the Ivy and you eat at a Harvester; if I eat when you go hungry – then that communicates division and difference and food is not uniting us at all.

We eat routinely, we eat daily bread, and we stop noticing the significance of food. Food marks the great occasions: birthdays and baptisms. We eat when we are sad after funerals. They serve last meals on death row. We have designed dinner jackets, and rituals with wishbones. We count calories, we wonder about fat, salt and sugar. Food shapes us, in every sense and feast, it comforts and defines, and feast and fast take us into the heart of our faith. Scripture is shot through with references to food. There are lists of the most common words in Scripture – they are dominated by the obvious words: *and, the, of, that, to...* Then there are a group of words with their roots in the faith of Israel: *Lord, Land, God, people, Jerusalem*. And then *eat* - a word that occurs more in scripture than *hear* or *speak, sin* or *spirit*. From the apple in Eden, to the Last Supper, from the food Abraham gave to angels to the marriage supper of the Lamb. The Jews knew themselves Jewish when they kept the food laws, Jesus redefined the community when he ate with sinners. Food defines us.

So, what does it say about us and the city we live in, the city with the second highest GDP in the country, that two years ago 2,600 people had to rely on help from food banks? That was two years ago. The number rose 7,500 in 2012 and this year it will be something like 14,000 people, half of them children. In the UK as a whole half a million people are now reliant on food aid and four million do not have a healthy diet. Food poverty is a major issue in this country and in this city.

If you have read newspapers or watched Television or listened to the radio recently you will know something about this. Food poverty is news and it is controversial. Recently, Jamie Oliver has been critical of the poor who, he says, buy junk food and yet can find the money for big television sets. Michael Gove has suggested that it is poor decision-making that drives someone to a food bank. Food is power, remember – that makes it controversial. So we need to think about Jamie Oliver and Michael Gove. We might note that there is something of a culture of blame in their remarks. That is a culture that is becoming more prevalent in this country and it is pernicious. If either man were to fall over in the street, what would they want? Would they want someone to explain to them the nature of their mistake and how they need to look where they are going or would they want to be helped to their feet?

We could think about blame and the good it does. We need to think too, about the independent reports that have come out in the last three months that say that the major causes of acute food poverty are benefit changes, delays in paying benefit, the reassessment of sickness benefit, rising fuel bills and systemic unemployment. We need to ask what decisions all those children who depend on food aid have made. What was their mistake that left them hungry?

We need to listen not just to Mr Oliver and Mr Gove, but to some of those who live with food poverty, like a woman called Jack Monroe. Listen to this:

Today has seen fourteen job applications go in... for care work, shop work, factory work, minimum wage work, any kind of work, because quite simply, this doesn't work.

For reasons unbeknownst to me, this month my Housing Benefit was over £100 short. ... £670 of rent can't be paid of £438 of Housing Benefit. ... Now I'm not only in arrears, but last night when I opened my fridge to find some leftover tomato pasta, an onion, and a knob of stem ginger, I gave the pasta to my boy and went to bed hungry This morning, small boy had one of the last Weetabix, mashed with water, with a glass of tap water to wash it down with. 'Where's Mummy's breakfast?' he asks, big blue eyes and two year old concern.

Poverty isn't just having no heating, or not quite enough food, or unplugging your fridge and turning your hot water off. It's not a tourism trade, it's not cool, ... Poverty is the sinking feeling when your small boy finishes his one Weetabix and says 'more mummy, bread and jam please mummy' as you're wondering whether to take the TV or the guitar to the pawn shop first, and how to tell him that there is no bread or jam.

This Sunday and on other Sundays, at other harvest festivals in the city, other preachers will be making similar points. I have been part of a group working with Andy Street and the 5K partnership, which support the people working on the ground to address this evil in our midst: Fare Share, Trussell Trust, Matthew Tree. We call do something about this.

- We can Volunteer
- We can give Food or Money to
- We can be aware that people near to us may need help
- We can Pray for those who need that helps and for those who give it.

You will find information on the diocesan website, and from the beginning of the week, with this sermon, on the Cathedral website

Hunger is not just a scandal it's a cancer. It grows. People who have to live on an inadequate diet are more likely to develop cancer, heart disease, diabetes and (by a wicked kind of fate) obesity. They are also more likely to suffer from stress, poor academic results and shortened life expectancy. That is the harvest of the poor.

With those other churches in the city we will continue to talk about this. This is an injustice on our doorstep and it touches our faith. This morning, at the end of that extraordinary gospel reading, we heard Jesus say: 'I am the bread of life'. It is memorable stuff and the Jews who heard him say it would have sat

bolt upright. They knew their scriptures. They knew this wasn't just a metaphor, this wasn't just rhetoric – this was a promise. The Jews who heard Jesus knew that the prophets had looked forward to a time when people would long for real food and they would be satisfied.

Not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but for hearing the word of the Lord.

Do you see? Here is Jesus who is the bread we have been waiting for and it doesn't just fill you up, it really nourishes you, it puts you right. This is real food, what Ecclesiasticus called 'the bread of understanding'. In Scripture food is what you eat in the Kingdom; it is justice, the reign of God, the promise come round at last. There is food in this service – bread and wine at a table – and it is not just a taste of that promise, it isn't bread Jesus gives us, it is himself.

We of all people should know that bread, food, is more than comfort, it is life, it is community, it is our commitment to one another and God's commitment to us. When you go short of food you are not just hungry, you are an outsider, because good is power and food is company.

Our gospel has at its heart the generosity of God, overflowing abundant love, sheer gift, the gift of his life to us. Fed at God's table, fed with God's life, we must ask what we will do to feed the hungry who are so much nearer to us than we once believed.