OUR DAILY BREAD

FOOD IN GOD'S CREATION

Sermon

for Creation Time 2011

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'OUR DAILY BREAD'

John 6, 1-12

'The great community problem of our modern world is how to share bread.'

These words were said by George MacLeod, the Founder of the Iona Community in Scotland, several decades ago. They are no less true now than they were then-more so, for we know that the gap between the rich of the earth, among whom we must count ourselves, and the earth's poor, after thirty post-war years of narrowing, has been followed by thirty-five years in which it has got wider - so wide that there has never been a time in human history when it was so great, or affected so many people. Truly, Lazarus is far away.

But the gospel **[John 6, 1-12: Jesus feeds the five thousand]** is a vivid reminder that the problem of how to share bread is not a new one. Here is one of the most familiar stories in the bible-and one of the few which appears in all four gospels; each with their own style of reportage, their own reason for telling the story.

I love this story because it shows Jesus living with the huge tensions that were erupting round about him, struggling to find time and space for solitude and prayer, and yet following the movement of his heart, going out in compassion to the people who crowded round him wherever he went, full of need, full of a reawakened hope. And I love it for the bit that describes how everyone ate. John reads, *'they all had as much as they wanted.'* The other gospels all say, *'everyone ate, and had enough*.' It is, I think, one of the most beautiful images in the Bible, this picture of sufficiency, of sharing, of a basic need satisfied – and no one going hungry!

I thought about these words one day when I was reading the morning paper, as one does, turning over the pages that so graphically describe the troubles and persecutions, the awful horror, flicking through, as one does, the wars and rumours of wars, the famines and earthquakes, filing away the information in my very-well

informed mind over my toast. Then, just as I was thinking it was time to get a move on, I was grabbed by the scruff of the neck and slammed up against the wall by the Lord God Almighty, as one is.

At the bottom of the page, I read a story of a child, a small 12-year old Kenyan boy, who had set out to escape an existence of utter destitution and hopelessness by climbing high up under a jet plane standing at Nairobi airport and into the tiny space behind the wheel carriage. But when the wheels retracted, they retracted back into his body, and he was crushed to death, suffering terrible injuries. He had no identification, no name, but it is thought that he was probably one of 40,000 street children who live in Nairobi. I read the story, and I found myself weeping uncontrollably for an African child. As I said, for me it was a word from the Lord, reminding me that the great community problem of our modern world is how to share bread.

I remembered these words again when I thought about the Last Supper, about Jesus sharing bread with his disciples, as Christians everywhere still do in his name. Is this how we are to share bread, loving our friends to the end, tender, intimate, serving one another? My life has been based on this conviction. But I found myself caught on the lethal point of contradiction between the gospel story and the newspaper one. The reality of our world is that we, the wealthy and powerful of the world, having bread, decide who will get to eat it. And the poor are still hungry.

Of course, you and I don't necessarily *feel* like the wealthy and powerful of the world, especially in a time of looming cuts and financial austerity. Though Britain is part of the G20, the association of the 20 richest economies in the world, the fallout from the credit crunch and the global financial crisis may well be making us feel anxious, vulnerable, defensive of what we have. And it's not surprising that much of this anxiety gets projected onto food! After all, food is central to all our lives; no matter how rich or poor we are, we all need to eat.

But food has become an extraordinarily complex and emotive subject, full of contradictions. Cookery books dominate the bestseller lists, there are whole television channels dedicated to programmes about cooking, restaurants, food-growing, celebrity chefs, and the interesting term, 'food pornography' has entered our dictionary. And yet at the same time, many, many people effectively do not know how to cook at all.

As a nation we eat out far more than any generation before us. Obesity, especially childhood obesity, is turning into a serious national epidemic. Children in parts of our country are suffering from malnutrition. We are confused about what constitutes healthy eating, confused by the labelling on the food we buy, confused about what the solutions might be. The emotional and psychological meanings of food are even more of a minefield; dieting, eating disorders, what constitutes good parenting, the role of food and meals in family and community life, the values of hospitality.

And that's before we even start on the big questions of sustainable agriculture, factory farming, climate change, energy use, resource shortages and conflicts, trade rules and global hunger. The bottom line of almost every major global problem has got food in it somewhere. So I think it's still very relevant that in the Lord's Prayer, the family prayer of the church, after words of praise to God, the first plea we make, the top of the agenda, is: **'Give us today our daily bread'**.

Bread, of course, as well as being a real thing in itself, also stands as a symbol for other things - for homes, healthcare, work, hope, justice - all the things that Jesus was always going on about, the necessities of life, the wherewithal to sustain life. And it is hard to imagine what Jesus, or Elisha, another biblical figure who fed hungry people, or Elijah, who knew what it was like to go hungry and was fed by a poor woman, might have made of the gala dinner menus routinely fed to the leaders of the G20 at summits and conferences that cost so many hundreds of millions of pounds to hold.

Might Jesus, having made it very clear to his disciples that the question of their neighbours' hunger was a question that should concern them, have spoken to the world leaders as he subsequently spoke to the crowds he fed in the chapter that follows the one we heard from John's gospel. Would he have said, 'you are looking for me because you've already got all you wanted, not because you understand what I am about? Would he have told them and all the rest not to work for food that goes bad but for the food of the Son of Man? Would he have reminded them that food for ourselves is a material question but food for our neighbours is a spiritual one? I think we can well imagine how Jesus would have responded to rich countries which seem to lack any kind of will to lift the heavy loads they have placed on the backs of the poorest of the world.

We go to great lengths, do we not, to protect our right to control who will get bread. We protect our interests, our shares, our bonuses, our boundaries, our freedom in the markets of the globe at every level. And sometimes, it's hard to see that the church does anything more than mirror the world. We, having bread, decide who we will permit to share it - and not only to share it, but to break it and distribute it, though we are not always so interested in those who make it or bake it.

Sometimes it's helpful to look at things from a different perspective. I'd like to share some stories of partners Christian Aid works with in poorer parts of the world. They are stories of food producers-you could call them farmers, but their lives might seem very different to us from the farmers we know, though perhaps they have more in common than you might imagine. They too have anxieties about food and about livelihoods.

Kenya

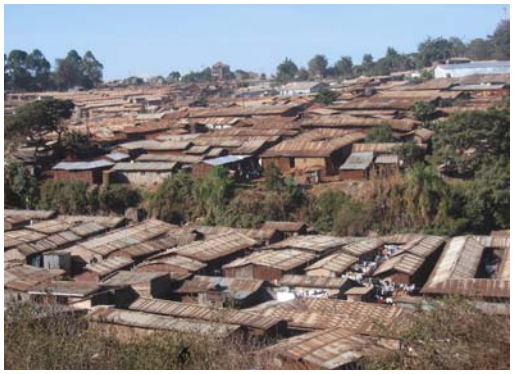

Photo: musicfiend

Joseph lives in the Mbeere region of Kenya. As in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, Mbeere has been significantly and negatively affected by unpredictable climate change. This is one of the main reasons why so many rural people have moved to Nairobi, millions of them, unable any longer to make a living and putting enormous pressure on the city's infrastructure, living in vast slums like Kibera. It's one of the reasons there are so many street children in Nairobi. In the Mbeere region, crop yields have been diminishing, and as they have no access to the kind of technological advances in agricultural production that farmers in the west take for granted, they have an over-reliance on ancient farming methods. Never mind tractors, many food producers in Africa don't even have oxen and plough. They farm with hoes and machetes. Nor do they have access to something we take for granted, a simple thing like the weather forecast. This mattered less when weather patterns were predictable; now they are anything but. So the first obstacle that Joseph faces as a farmer is climate change, the second

is lack of access to scientific and technological advances. And his third problem is having to rely on middlemen to sell his goods. They are often unscrupulous, which means that he is less likely to get a fair price or make any profit for his very hard work.

Bolivia

Photo: Sam Beebe/Ecotrust

Maria lives in the Beni region in Northern Bolivia. Bolivia is the poorest country in South America and Beni is part of the Amazon basin. Maria is another farmer with big problems. Poor and excluded indigenous communities in this region have suffered very badly through logging and deforestation of the rainforest destroying their traditional livelihoods. Though they have lived there since time immemorial, indigenous communities cannot produce the kind of land titles we in the west are used to-in the past, they never needed them anyway. Nor do they have the access to lawyers which could help them claim their land rights. So big logging companies can destroy the rainforest with impunity. The World Bank estimates that 80% of all logging in Bolivia is illegal. The deforestation has also increased flooding, as it has in many parts of the world. So Maria and her people needed to find new crops to farm that are more resilient to flooding.

Ghana

Lawrence is a farmer in Ghana. He's had a very hard time in the last fifteen years or so. Since the trade liberalisation of the 1990s (that's when poor countries were forced to open up their home markets to western goods by international institutions like the IMF, the World Trade Organisation and the World Bank, usually because of the global debt crisis), Ghana's agricultural economy has been drastically affected by subsidised foreign imports. You know that idea that kind-hearted people in the west had about European butter mountains and food surpluses, that the thing to do with them was to send them to Africa-forget it! It's a very bad idea indeed. So in Ghana, rice and tomatoes were among the main products, but now, two-thirds of rice growers are operating at a loss, and 90% of the tomato paste is imported. The offloading of European and American surpluses on to African and South American markets simply put local producers like Lawrence out of business. Heavily subsidised western goods lower prices to such an extent that local traders cannot compete. Stringent regulations placed by western-controlled bodies like the World Trade Organisation, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank on trade and markets in developing countries forbid subsidies, but these regulations are not observed by the very countries which impose them. It’s a question of ‘do what we say, not what we do’.

For example, the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union combines a direct subsidy payment for crops and land which may be cultivated with price support mechanisms, including guaranteed minimum prices, import tariffs and quotas on certain goods from outside the EU. By adding import tariffs to agricultural goods exported by farmers in developing countries, whilst at the same time undercutting them in their domestic market where European oversupply is "dumped" uninhibited by import levies, the CAP is throttling agricultural business within these countries whether national or global and forcing them back into an economically stunted subsistence lifestyle.

Many African and Asian dairy, tomato and poultry farmers cannot keep up with cheap competition from Europe, thus their incomes can no longer provide for their families. They end up relying heavily on imports, which are often the EU's subsidized exports, or even on aid because their livelihoods have been destroyed.

The aim of the common agricultural policy (CAP) is to provide farmers with a reasonable standard of living, consumers with quality food at fair prices and to preserve rural heritage. From a European perspective, these are fair things to wish for; though there is strong evidence that most of the subsidy money goes to large farms. Because, through economies of scale, these are the most profitable, it is often argued that subsidy money actually helps large farms to buy out small ones. So small farmers in the UK may have some sympathy with farmers in Africa in feeling that the scales of economics, and indeed, the scales of justice, are heavily weighted against them! It certainly feels pretty unfair from where Lawrence is standing.

Climate change, unfair trade rules, lack of money to invest in tools, equipment, technology and product improvement, unscrupulous middlemen paying low prices and creaming off large amounts; these are just some of the obstacles that stand between Joseph, Maria and Lawrence and their livelihoods.

Photo: IFDC Photography

In the colonial era, western countries, including Britain, developed their own economies greatly helped by the flow of raw resources they extracted from colonised countries. They shipped these raw materials to Europe and America, processed them here and then sold them back to these poor countries at greatly inflated prices. We are pretty much there again, in our neo-colonial era. Joseph, Maria and Lawrence would all be much better off, and we would need to provide much less aid, if they could afford the infrastructure to develop their own processing plants in their own countries, if they could find ways of investing in and controlling their own economies. Christian Aid is supporting them to improve their lives and livelihoods in different ways.

And how does this all link to the food we put on our plates? Well, it starts with what we put in our shopping trolleys. First of all, we can look for the Fairtrade mark on a whole range of foodstuffs. It's a guarantee that those who produced it got a fair price for their product and their labour. It also tells us that some of the profit is put back into the local community, for investment not only in their product but in education, health, all of the things that help to provide an infrastructure for livelihoods that we take for granted.

We can also buy locally, especially supporting small farmers and producers, and helping our own local economies. And crucially, especially for eco-congregations, we can all do something about climate change, whether it's cutting down energy use, lobbying politicians and finding out more about its impact worldwide. We could try only eating when we're hungry and not for all the other reasons we eat. We could share more meals with friends and strangers. We could enjoy and give thanks for our food because on a worldwide scale, we are at the top. We do not know how well off we are, in the quality and accessibility of our food. And so we might also then ask, if food is really cheap, who is it that's paying the price of it, because someone somewhere is.

***'He has filled the hungry with good things…**' (Luke 1, 46-55)*

This verse is from the Magnificat, Mary's song. Hers is the *great* New Testament song of liberation. She anticipates the nature of glory, and she names it and she celebrates it. This is what glory looks like...

He has scattered the proud with all their plans…
He has lifted up the lowly…
He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away with empty hands.

Photo: Nicoletta Antonini

This is how it will be. Mary is the prophet of the poor, announcing the transformed social order. The spiritual realm is embedded in economic and political reality.

And the anxiety and pain of engagement with the economic and political realities of our world contain that same promise of glory, embedded deep within them, a cosmic liberation in which the hungry will be filled with good things. If we share the anxiety and pain, we need to remember that we also share the promise of glory.

'I hate your religious festivals; stop your noisy songs; instead, let justice roll like a river, and righteousness like a stream that never runs dry.' (Amos 5, 21 – 24)

So spoke the prophet, and indeed, if we get so caught up in the perfection of our own remembrance, or the beauty of our ceremonies and prayers, or our own nourishment, that we forget that people are still hungry and we are embodied with them in Christ's body, then we rather miss the point of Jesus the bread of life. The bread was broken to be shared.

When we envisage our feast of sufficiency, our great feast in the kingdom of God, I will be happy to forgo gala banquets in favour of a simple picnic by the lake. But we will not be a true celebration until everyone is included; the street children and the peasant farmers as well. God give us grace to share our bread.

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