

OUR DAILY BREAD

FOOD IN GOD'S CREATION

Sermon notes

for Creation Time 2011



Based on the Revised Common Lectionary

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Photo: [Susy Morris](#) 

'What is the food like?', 'Who is providing the food?', 'Is there enough food to go round?' Food-poisoning, food-rationing, food-security, food-market. Our everyday talk constantly makes reference to food. And this is no surprise, as obviously food and drink are essentials for life. We need food for energy on a regular basis. And food is also one of the enjoyments of life, if we are not worrying where the next meal is coming from. Food is a major part of our trade. Much of our land is given to food production. Huge industries are involved in food distribution and retail.

Christians acknowledge that the ultimate source of our food is the Creator God, whose faithfulness to the covenant promise that seed-time and harvest will not cease is our ultimate food security. But there is a great deal that happens between the feeding and watering 'by God's Almighty hand' and the enjoyment of food at a party in suburbia, or the empty stomachs of too many people in sub-Saharan Africa. When we pray "Give us our daily bread" we are both acknowledging our dependence on God's generosity, and our realisation that the answer to that prayer needs to include agriculture, commerce, sharing, trade-justice, animal welfare, diet and a host of other considerations.

This year our Creation Time sermon notes focus on the theme of Food in God's creation, and we will select the themes of celebration, responsible choices, sufficiency, equity and faithful discipleship. May God make us more aware of his generosity and our responsibilities as we pray for our daily bread.

These notes do not provide complete sermons in outline, but a rich selection of suggestions, starting points, and possible lines to follow.

Week 1: 4 September

Celebration: food and community

Exodus 12. 1 – 14
Psalm 149
Romans 13. 8 – end
Matthew 18. 15 – 20

Week 2: 11 September

Choices: food and salvation

Exodus 14. 19 – end
Psalm 114
Romans 14. 1 – 12
Matthew 18. 21 – 35

Week 3: 18 September

Sufficiency: food and God's generosity

Exodus 16. 2 – 15
Psalm 105
Philippians 1. 21 – end
Matthew 20. 1 – 16

Week 4: 25 September

Famine and drought: food and sin

Exodus 17. 1 – 7
Psalm 78. 1 – 4, 12 – 16
Philippians 2. 1 – 13
Matthew 21. 23 – 32

Week 5: 2 October

Creation and covenant: food and responsibility

Exodus 20. 1-4, 7-9, 12-20
Psalm 19
Philemon 3. 4b – 14
Matthew 21. 33 – end

Week 1: Celebration: food and community

4th September - Trinity 11

Exodus 12. 1 – 14
Psalm 149
Rom ans13. 8 – end
Matthew 18. 15 – 20




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Food, festivities and fellowship often belong together. We celebrate birthdays with a party, weddings with a reception, Christmas with a family meal. The Hebrew Bible refers to a number of Feasts which celebrated God's gifts and provisions, and were annual reminders of God's goodness. Passover, described in Exodus 12, solemnly recalls God's rescue of his people from slavery in Egypt through the shed blood of a lamb. It was initially a family, or neighbourhood, meal (vv. 3,4), and the annual feast was to be celebrated as a festival to the Lord (v. 14). Over time, the annual remembrance became more institutionalized (Deut. 16), but, by the time of Jesus, had reverted to more of a family occasion (Mark 14.16). Other feasts were noted for their joyous celebration. The Feast of Weeks, for example, celebrating harvest time, was a time of 'rejoicing before the Lord your God' (Deut. 16.11).

Food was understood as a gift of God's creation to 'strengthen and gladden the human heart' (Psalm 104. 15). Communion with God and fellowship with one another were appropriately celebrated with a meal. Jesus himself 'came eating and drinking' (Matt. 11.19). Some of the early Christian gatherings were known as 'love feasts' (Jude 12) - mutual love expressed in gatherings for fellowship and food.

A few years ago, the Methodist Minister Barbara Glasson was appointed to serve in the city of Liverpool. How was the Gospel to make an impact on the huge needs of a city centre? She found herself thinking about how a small amount of yeast can make a large difference in baking bread - and she mused about drawing together a small group of people to bake bread. They rented some rooms and got an oven and baked. For every one loaf they had for themselves, they gave one away - and people who received the fresh bread asked why. Some of them joined in the bread making. Gradually bread-making became a small community event - which included talking and reading the Bible and praying. The bread-making has provided a place where people can be safe and sheltered. The making of bread itself speaks of life: the kneading, the waiting, the companionship (= *cum panis*, 'with bread'). The concept of Bread Church - celebrating community and fellowship, and sharing - is growing elsewhere.

The Epistle reading (Rom.13. 8 – 14) calls on Christian people to 'love one another'; 'love your neighbour as yourself.' Christian fellowship and communion is always to be outward-looking, concerned for the needs of the neighbour wherever our lives impact on him or her. Our Gospel (Matt. 18. 15 – 20), is part of a block of teaching Jesus is giving to his disciples which shows how our relationships with each other must reflect our relationship with God. Behind verse 15 lies the Levitical instruction: "you shall not hate in your heart any one of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbour... you shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge... you shall love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord." (Lev.19.17f.).



Even in the matter of discipline in the church, which is the primary focus for this Gospel passage, the guiding principle is neighbour love. In fact, when two or three meet together in Christ's name, he is there too - and their relationships need to demonstrate that.

One form of grace sometimes said before meals includes the prayer that God would 'keep us ever mindful of the needs of others.' Neighbour love looks outwards. Our proper use of food to celebrate and deepen our communion with each other must not be at the expense of neighbours elsewhere who have little daily bread. Another week we will look more closely at the scourge of poverty - one of the sources of hatred, and bearing grudges, between those who 'have' and those who 'have not'. But this week, let us be caught up into the gratitude of one psalmist, who sings God's praise in the assembly of the faithful (Psalm 149.1), and of another who blesses the Lord for the gift of food and wine and oil (Psalm 104. 15).

Our Eucharist (=thanksgiving) recalls the Passover celebration of the gift of a new start through the shed blood of the Lamb. It binds us together with all God's creation in using bread (which earth has given and human hands have made) and wine (fruit of the vine and work of human hands). It is a celebration of God's gracious gifts. We take the gifts, give thanks and share them, and receive them, and then we are sent out into the world to live and work to God's praise and glory.

St Paul's teaching about the Lord's Supper comes in the context of division in the church in Corinth (1 Cor.11.17 – 34). The division between the 'haves' and the have-nots' in society was being carried over into the times when dinner at home merged with the Lord's Supper. By this, said Paul, 'you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing (v.22). By contrast, the Eucharist reminds us that Jesus Christ gave himself to others in sheer grace. To share in the Eucharist must promote social transformation - no more 'haves' and 'have-nots' - all are to be treated justly in the light of God's generous gift.

In the Eucharist feast we 'proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Cor. 11.26), and our feast is in a sense a foretaste of the heavenly banquet of Messiah's kingdom. In 8th BC, Isaiah painted a picture of the time when 'the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines' (Isa. 25.6). Centuries later, Jesus spoke of many coming from east and west to eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (Matt.8.6; cf. Lk.14.15; Mark 14. 25). One of Jesus' parables of the kingdom is about a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son, and the servants scoured the streets and gathered in all whom they found, so that the wedding hall was filled with guests. (Matt. 22. 2,10).

'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' (Rev. 19.9).

For all that we receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful.

Week 2: Choices: food and salvation

11th September – Trinity 12

Exodus 14. 19 – end
Psalm 114
Romans 14. 1 – 12
Matthew 18. 21 – 35



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9/11

The Gospel contrast between retribution and mercy, the Epistle's calling to be non-judgmental, the story of the Israelites at the Red Sea at a moment of extreme uncertainty and fragility - all these are themes that come to mind on this anniversary of 9/11. Christian discipleship needs to find a way of expressing the compassion and mercy of God. It needs to chart a path of appropriate choices between right and wrong, but without the condemnatory judgmentalism which deprives the other of their humanity. The people of God need constantly to be reminded that their lives and their livelihood are dependent on the God of the Exodus. As the psalmist put it: "Tremble O earth at the presence of the Lord".

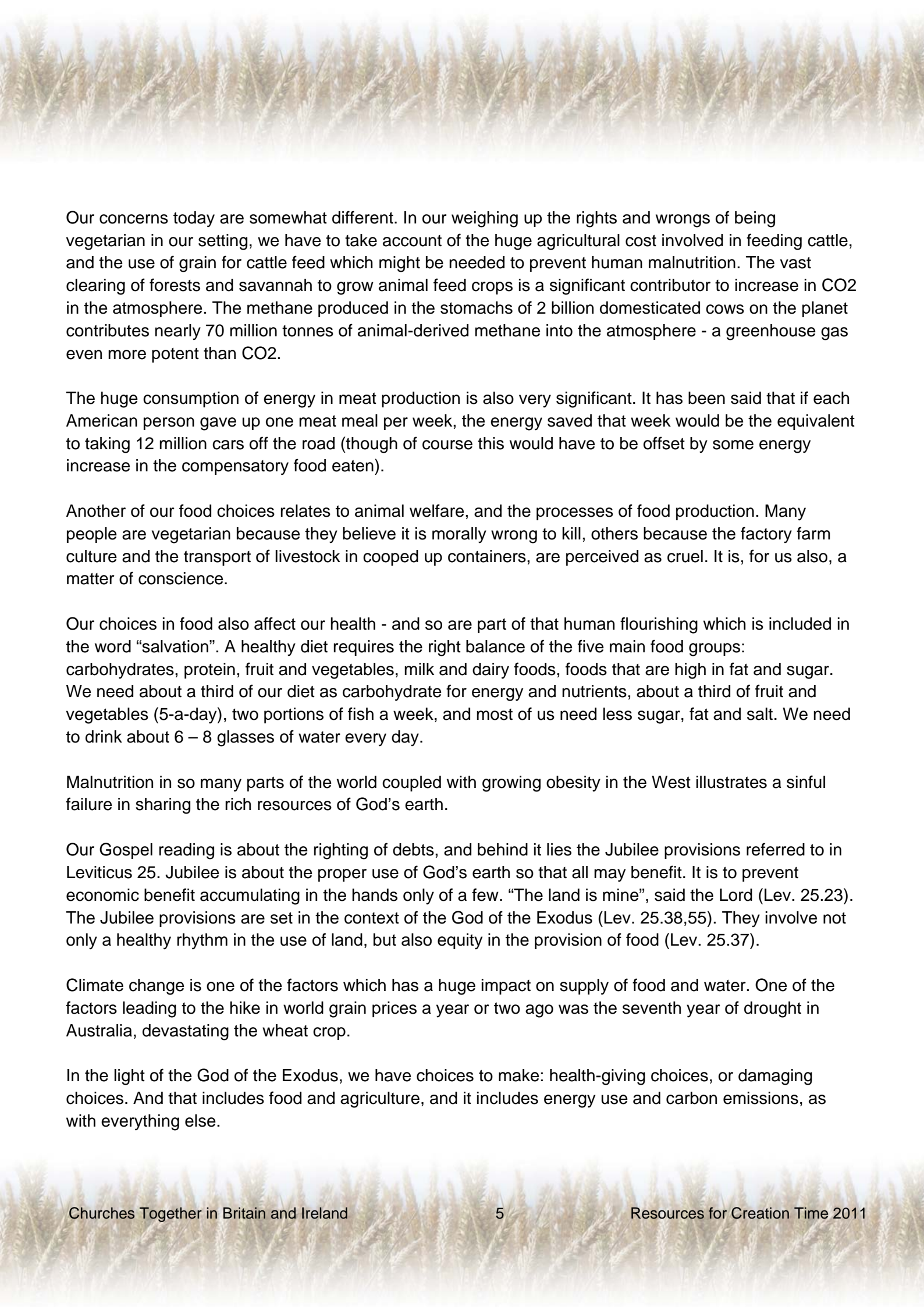
Choices: food and salvation

In rather different ways, these themes are also appropriate at this Creation time, as we think about appropriate choices in relation to food, and our dependence on the God of salvation.

Let us look back at our texts. The Israelites are faced with a dilemma. Behind them, the warring Egyptians; in front of them the sea; around them the wilderness. At this point of vulnerability, they hear Moses say "Stand firm and see the salvation of the Lord" (Exod. 14.13). And "salvation" is not only the physical rescue of the people from their bondage, it includes all the welfare benefits of being God's covenant people, including - if the people are obedient to God's will and God's ways - good health, 'for I am the Lord who heals you.' (Exod. 15.26).

What has "salvation / health" to do with our choices in food?

Interestingly, it is food that St Paul uses as one of his examples in his letter to the Christians in Rome, about the way they work out their salvation in practice. The first part of the chapter concerns the avoidance of judgmental attitudes against Christians who make different choices about food. Some felt obliged to be vegetarian, because they were concerned not to eat meat – possibly meat which was thought 'unclean' or which had been offered to idols in a pagan temple (cf. the discussion in 1 Cor. 10. 25f), whereas others felt free to eat meat 'for the earth and its fullness are the Lord's (1 Cor. 10.26), and in any case Jesus declared all foods 'clean' (Mark 7.19). The issue for St Paul was one of conscience, and of care for those with a 'weaker' conscience than ours.



Our concerns today are somewhat different. In our weighing up the rights and wrongs of being vegetarian in our setting, we have to take account of the huge agricultural cost involved in feeding cattle, and the use of grain for cattle feed which might be needed to prevent human malnutrition. The vast clearing of forests and savannah to grow animal feed crops is a significant contributor to increase in CO₂ in the atmosphere. The methane produced in the stomachs of 2 billion domesticated cows on the planet contributes nearly 70 million tonnes of animal-derived methane into the atmosphere - a greenhouse gas even more potent than CO₂.

The huge consumption of energy in meat production is also very significant. It has been said that if each American person gave up one meat meal per week, the energy saved that week would be the equivalent to taking 12 million cars off the road (though of course this would have to be offset by some energy increase in the compensatory food eaten).

Another of our food choices relates to animal welfare, and the processes of food production. Many people are vegetarian because they believe it is morally wrong to kill, others because the factory farm culture and the transport of livestock in cooped up containers, are perceived as cruel. It is, for us also, a matter of conscience.

Our choices in food also affect our health - and so are part of that human flourishing which is included in the word "salvation". A healthy diet requires the right balance of the five main food groups: carbohydrates, protein, fruit and vegetables, milk and dairy foods, foods that are high in fat and sugar. We need about a third of our diet as carbohydrate for energy and nutrients, about a third of fruit and vegetables (5-a-day), two portions of fish a week, and most of us need less sugar, fat and salt. We need to drink about 6 – 8 glasses of water every day.

Malnutrition in so many parts of the world coupled with growing obesity in the West illustrates a sinful failure in sharing the rich resources of God's earth.

Our Gospel reading is about the righting of debts, and behind it lies the Jubilee provisions referred to in Leviticus 25. Jubilee is about the proper use of God's earth so that all may benefit. It is to prevent economic benefit accumulating in the hands only of a few. "The land is mine", said the Lord (Lev. 25.23). The Jubilee provisions are set in the context of the God of the Exodus (Lev. 25.38,55). They involve not only a healthy rhythm in the use of land, but also equity in the provision of food (Lev. 25.37).

Climate change is one of the factors which has a huge impact on supply of food and water. One of the factors leading to the hike in world grain prices a year or two ago was the seventh year of drought in Australia, devastating the wheat crop.

In the light of the God of the Exodus, we have choices to make: health-giving choices, or damaging choices. And that includes food and agriculture, and it includes energy use and carbon emissions, as with everything else.

Week 3: Sufficiency: food and God's generosity

18th September - Trinity 13

Exodus 16. 2 – 15 Psalm 105 Philippians 1. 21 – end Matthew 20. 1 – 16



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No one has a right to extravagance. This was one of the lessons that the Israelites were to learn in the desert. According to the narrative in Exodus, they were hankering back to their time in Egypt “when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of food”. In the account in Numbers we learn that they were missing meat and fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, garlic (Num.11.4-6). They complained to Moses, and in response God provided bread from heaven (Exod. 16.4), which comprised manna in the mornings and quails in the evenings (Exod.16.31; 16.13). Manna was probably the secretion of certain insects which dropped to the ground, looked like coriander seed, and was coloured like gum resin. It had a honey taste and could be ground up, then boiled and made into cakes. (Num.11.7-9). If it was left untreated overnight it bred maggots and became foul (Exod.16.20), but if it was baked it could be preserved overnight to be used on the Sabbath.

There are various lessons that Israel was to learn from this experience. It was part of God's disciplining of the people in response to their complaining - to test them as to whether they trusted in the God of the Exodus or not (Exod. 16.4). It was to remind them of God's provision “It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat” (v.15), and was remembered by future generations as a sign of God's generosity (Exod.16.32). It was an illustration of the deeper truth that ‘one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord’ (Deut. 8.3,16). Indeed Jesus made clear the very restricted way in which manna was ‘bread from heaven’, in comparison with the Bread of Life which he embodied (John 6.31f.). Particularly, it was a journey away from extravagance and towards sufficiency. “Each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day.” (Exod.16.4). “They gathered as much as each of them needed.” (Exod. 16.18).

The psalmist celebrated God's generosity as a mark of his covenant faithfulness: “God gave them food from heaven in abundance” (Ps. 105.40), even though the following companion psalm also acknowledges that God's generosity was despite the peoples' “wanton craving” (Psalm 106.14), and was coupled with God's judgment against sin.

Divine faithfulness, and the sufficiency of divine provision – these are two of the major themes of this story about manna. The Gospel reading put the same point another way. The parable of the labourers in the vineyard is essentially about gift and grace. We receive the benefits of labouring in God's vineyard not because we deserve them, but because of God's gracious generosity. “Are you envious because I am generous?” (Matt. 20.15). All is of grace. As we sometimes pray at the offertory during Holy Communion “All things come from you, and of your own do we give you.”

All this underlines our obligation to work for an equitable distribution of the rich resources of God's earth. The inequities of food distribution are an injustice, as well as an insult to God "He who oppresses a poor man insults his Maker" (Prov. 14.31).

The first of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, agreed in Sept. 2000, was to resolve by the year 2015 "to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger – to reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than one dollar a day; to reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger." We are over 2/3 of the way to 2015. In some parts of Asia there has been significant progress; in sub-Saharan Africa very much less.

The story of the manna includes a recognition of sufficiency. As long ago as 1975, John Taylor wrote *Enough is enough*, in which he explored the sins of excess, especially in cultures where consumption of food and the accumulation of goods become the highest values, and in which waste and pollution, our plundering of the planet's natural resources of fuels and minerals, and our expenditure on the arms trade, is all leading to 'ruthless, unbridled, unthinking excess'.

What is now called "Food Security" is about sufficiency – whether there is enough to go round; how efficiently food can be obtained; whether it can be bought at a fair price; whether it is nutritious and safe. It is becoming an increasing problem because the current world population of about 6 billion is predicted to reach 9 billion by 2050. As people become richer they eat more meat, which takes more energy to produce. The drive towards biofuels has reduced the availability of some land used for food production. The high costs of oil have driven up the prices of storing and distributing food. Climate change is affecting what crops can be grown where.

And yet, it is estimated that the UK throws away 8.3 million tonnes of food every year, worth about £12bn, or about £650 worth of food each year for the average family.

In the developing world, over 30% of food harvested can be lost before it is eaten owing to insufficient processing, storage or transport. "Food security" raises huge economic and political questions - which force us back to our primary values. Are we committed to living with 'enough' so that there can be enough for everyone? Or is our worship of the idol of 'consumer choice' constantly pulling us back to the 'fleshpots of Egypt'? If we are sustained by the word of the living God and if, as St Paul put it, 'to me to live is Christ', our lifestyles should demonstrate the generosity and sufficiency of God's provision - for us and for everyone. The problem is not sufficiency, but consumption habits. Average UK emissions of CO₂ per person are under half that of the USA, nearly twice that of Sweden, and about 90 times that of Uganda.

When we pray "Give us this day our daily bread" we are asking God to provide for us for today - and to provide for all our hungry neighbours. As often with prayer, God frequently enables us to be instruments in the answering of it. The prayer for bread (that is for present maintenance of our bodily needs) is part of a prayer also for forgiveness and guidance (our spiritual and relational needs). Body, mind and spirit belong together in our response to God's generosity.

Week 4: Famine and drought - food and sin

25th September - Trinity 14

Exodus 17. 1 – 7
Psalm 78. 1-4, 12 – 16.
Philippians 2. 1 – 13
Matthew 21. 23 – 32



Photo: [Jeff Attaway](#) 

One in eight people on this planet have no access to clean water. One of the features of climate change is that the likelihood is growing of desert areas becoming much larger, and droughts increasing in intensity and duration.

The people of Israel in the wilderness knew what thirst was, and cried to Moses for relief. Moses interpreted this as the people ‘testing the Lord’ - as did the Psalmist when he wrote about this later: “Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof.” (Psalm 95.8-9). Despite their sin, God still provided for them: “He split rocks open in the wilderness, and gave them drink abundantly.” (Psalm 78.15). And yet God’s grace did not prevent further sin. “Yet they sinned still more against him, rebelling against the Most High in the desert” (Psalm 78.17).

There is no direct and easy equation between human sin and human suffering - the Book of Job tells us that. We cannot say that any one person’s suffering must be due to their sin. But, on the other hand, it is clear throughout the Bible that human sinful activity has its consequences. For example, the prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem sees the effects of human sinfulness and disobedience to God’s ways in a devastating period of drought and famine:

“The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant.” (Isa. 24.4ff).

Our Gospel reading is about the authority of God in the kingdom of God, and the calling to live ‘in the way of righteousness’. (Matt.21.32). There are those who are like the son in the parable, who makes promises he does not keep. There are others who, perhaps with a shaky start, do walk the ‘way of righteousness’ and demonstrate their desire to live the life of the kingdom. Jesus tells the parable in relation to the religious leaders of his day - but the primary thrust of it carries to today. The life of God’s kingdom includes the calling to live in the light of God’s authority, and walk in his ways. This side of the Cross and the Resurrection, St Paul writes about the authority of Jesus not in terms of dominion but of humble service, and argues that the service of the Christian community should reflect the mind of Christ, and be marked by consolation, compassion, love and humility. (Phil. 2.2).

So what is the response of today’s Christian community to the needs of those living in a time of famine and drought? How is the life of God’s kingdom to be lived out? In what ways do we demonstrate consolation, compassion, love and humility in a world which is riddled with inequity, poverty and malnutrition?

One Christian-inspired response to issues of poverty was the development in 1979 of Traidcraft, which joined with others in 1992 to launch the Fairtrade Foundation. The well-known Fairtrade label now appears on coffee, tea, banana and increasing numbers of other products. The idea is that companies pay a guaranteed minimum price to cover the costs of sustainable production, which holds even if the market price drops. They also pay a premium so that producers can invest more in local projects. Standards are set to ensure fair pay, fair price, good working conditions, and environmentally friendly processes. The prediction is that by 2012 sales of UK Fairtrade marked goods will achieve £2 billion.

Another organization, Christian Aid, is urging us to set our sights on the complete eradication of poverty. As they put it, 'poverty is an outrage against humanity, robbing people of dignity, freedom and hope'; whether that is poverty of opportunity for health, education, or wellbeing, or poverty of political freedom, or freedom from violence; whether that is economic poverty, or social poverty: the lack of community wellbeing and of a secure environment. Or whether it is lack of food and water. Poverty is about power. Essentially, is about broken relationships between the rich and powerful on the one hand and the oppressed poor on the other. Christian Aid strives to achieve equality, dignity and freedom for all. It comes from a belief that all people are made in God's image. It works at governance, education, tax rules, health issues, and climate change.

Last spring, Christian Aid quoted the prayer of Catherine Kithuku, determined to improve the living standards in the Matopeni slum in Nairobi, where there was no clean water and a sewer through the middle of the street.

"I pray for change. I pray to live a clean, comfortable life, with privacy. I pray to see my family move out of slum life. I would ask people to pray for better housing, for children to be educated, for jobs for the young people, and support for single parents and the elderly. But most of all I pray for clean water."

Then in July last year, a Christian Aid partner organization began work with the Matopeni community to construct new drains in the slum. By December, they had five feeder channels and a main drain to carry sewage away from the settlement. So this last Christmas was the first time that the community could celebrate without the fear that their children would fall ill with diseases caused by poor sanitation. Now they can start work to lay water pipes and install taps to bring clean water to the settlement. Catherine's prayer is beginning to be answered.

Failure to respond to the needs of the hungry and thirsty is sin.

Jesus said, in his parable of sheep and goats: "I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink". (Matt. 25.35).

St. Paul applies the attitude of generosity even to enemies: If your enemies are hungry feed them, if they are thirsty, give them something to drink. (Rom. 12.20).

Once again, living out the life of God's kingdom means compassion, humility, justice and neighbour love.

Week 5: Creation and covenant: food and responsibility

2nd October - Trinity 15

Exodus 20. 1-4, 7-9, 12-20
Psalm 19
Philippians 3. 4b – 14
Matthew 21. 33 – end



Photo: [vida de vidro](#) 

Psalm 19, whether or not originally two poems brought together in the worship of Israel, brings together the glory of God in creation (vv. 1–6) with the life-giving power of his law (vv. 7–14). In the second part, God is given his covenant name, Yahweh, written as LORD, seven times. The two parts of the psalm together give us an insight into God's creation as the framework for God's covenant relationship with his people, and into God's covenant relationship with his people as the meaning of creation.

It is within the covenant of God's grace that the instructions of God's 'law' belong. When we take law out of the context of grace, we are on the high road to legalism. But in the wider context of divine grace, 'law' (or torah, or 'fatherly instruction') has its place in guiding God's people in living the sort of responsible lives which reflect God's covenanted faithfulness and love (Exod.20.6).

The Ten Commandments, for example, are less a code of law to be obeyed, than a description of the pattern of responsive life appropriate for people whom the covenant LORD has brought out of slavery (Exod. 20.1). That is why Jesus can summarise all the law and the prophets (Matt.22.37-40) in two quotations from covenant documents: 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind...You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' (Deut. 6.5; Lev.19.18).

St Paul knew all about law - 'as to righteousness under the law, blameless' (Phil.3.6), but he came to regard even the attainments of obedience to the law as 'loss' because of 'the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.' (v.8). He speaks of finding 'the righteousness of God' - a term which could be translated 'God's justice', or 'God's covenant faithfulness' – in Jesus Christ.

For St Paul, the pattern of life appropriate for God's people comes from being 'found in Christ', 'knowing Christ'. So for Christians, sharing the life of Christ is a New Testament way of describing living as God's covenant people - and so finding 'the meaning of creation' in Christ, for, as St Paul says elsewhere in a remarkable passage, 'in him all things in heaven and earth were created - through him and for him.' (Col.1.16). Creation and covenant both find their meaning in Christ. Both call us to faithful and loving response.

Creation and covenant are both themes not too far below the surface of our Gospel reading. The parable in Matthew 21, 33ff. describes a vineyard and the behaviour of unfaithful tenants. The vineyard was the landowner's property; the lease to the tenants was in his gift. The tenants were given responsibility of care for the vineyard.

The landowner expected fruitfulness, but all he got was betrayal and destruction. The tenants behaved as if they owned the place, and so tried to usurp the position of the landlord himself.

The chief priests and Pharisees realized Jesus was talking about them (v.45). And at one level he was. Isaiah 5, 1–7 speaks of ‘the house of Israel’ as God’s vineyard. He expected it to yield grapes but it only produced wild grapes. The Jewish leaders realised that Jesus was speaking in allegorical terms. The landowner (God) expected the tenants (religious leaders) to be responsible, but they rejected his servants (God’s prophets), and killed the son (did they realize who they were dealing with?).

But let us widen the lens and see the vineyard as God’s creation, for which God cares and wishes to be fruitful. God entrusts the work of care for creation to human beings, as tenants. He expects them to act responsibly on his behalf. Behind the covenants God makes with people (Abraham, Moses, David) there is a ‘cosmic covenant’ in which God expresses his faithful commitment to the whole of creation. ‘I am establishing my covenant with you, and your descendents after you, and with every living creature.’ (Gen 9. 9,12). This includes the divine promise: “As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest...shall not cease.” (Gen 8.22). And God expects humanity to exercise a response of faithful tenancy. This is part of the meaning of the mandate given to all humanity ‘made in God’s image’ in Genesis 1, which includes “subduing” the earth (Gen. 1.28). That word is best understood as referring to agriculture - the use of the land to provide food for humanity. It is coupled with the ‘dominion’ over the animal world, which is the language not of domination and exploitation but of benevolent kingship: kings were responsible for the welfare and wellbeing of their subjects (cf. Ps.72. 1-4). So the faithful tenancy of God’s creation which humanity shares includes agriculture for providing food, and concern for the welfare of the animals.

The parable of the vineyard faces us with the question of responsibility. In our production of food, and concern for animal welfare, are we acting as faithful tenants of God’s creation?

Just a very few examples of many:

- Industrial food production has devastated tropical forests.
- Modern industrialized agriculture uses significant quantities of fossil fuels in pesticide and herbicide production, as well as in mechanization.
- Over-fishing leads to the waste of huge quantities of edible fish returned back to the ocean to fulfil certain allowed “quotas”.
- Agricultural policies, and the prevalence of heavy debts to world banks from the poorest countries, get in the way of equity in the distribution of food.

Christians should be at the forefront of ecological concerns. Our Eucharistic worship, celebrating God’s new creation in Christ, is both a response of gratitude for God’s generosity and grace and a commitment to live equitably and responsibly with our neighbours. St Paul writes of knowing Christ, and the power of his resurrection. God give us grace to live in the light of the coming kingdom of his glory, where his disciples share in his joy and ‘eat and drink at his table’. (Luke 22.30).

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