

Sermon for Mount Macedon and Riddells Creek
3rd Sunday of Lent, 7th of March 2010

Isaiah 55:1-9

Psalms 63:1-8

Luke 13:1-9

As part of my continuing effort to live the “holy and disciplined life” to which the Uniting Church’s ordination vows commit me, I’ve recently been thinking a lot about food and about what “holy and disciplined” eating might be. As part of this exploration I read a book by a journalist, Michael Pollan, called *Food Rules: An Eater’s Manual*,¹ which talks about how we in the industrialised West, with all the options we have, can eat well. After much research, Pollan came up with three common sense food rules: Eat Food; Not Too Much; Mostly Plants.

It’s the first one of those rules that I want us to think about today. Eat Food. At first sight that seems incredibly weird. What else could we eat, assuming that we’re over the age of three and no longer interested in eating things like dirt? But Pollan says that a lot of the things that are available to eat nowadays aren’t food, they’re edible food-like substances, highly processed, created by food scientists, full of chemical additives. He has all sorts of suggestions of ways of avoiding them, things like: avoid food products that contain ingredients you wouldn’t keep in the pantry; avoid food products that contain ingredients a third-grader can’t pronounce; eat food made from ingredients that you can picture in their raw state. By doing things like this, he says, we can make sure that we’re eating real food, and not just edible food-like substances.

I’ve started today’s sermon talking about food, because the Bible is full of it. In our society food is readily and even instantly available, but in biblical times, gathering and preparing food was difficult and time-consuming, and there was always the risk of famine. Many countries round the world continue to share the biblical experience, which is why some of our Lent Event money will go to providing agricultural assistance in Timor Leste and wells in Papua New Guinea. These countries understand why food plays such an important role in the Bible – because the provision of our daily bread isn’t certain and is something for which God is to be thanked.

Because food was so important in biblical times, it had an enormous spiritual significance. About half of Jesus’ parables talk about food, about farming and storing food and sharing banquets and eating wheat and figs. The central ritual of our faith is the Eucharist, when we gather together as a community around a meal. And in today’s first reading, we hear again food’s symbolic importance, as God invites exiles to a banquet.

Today’s reading from the Hebrew Scriptures comes from the Book of Isaiah, but it *wasn’t* written by the Isaiah son of Amos whose name we’re given in the first verse of that book. Scholars agree that there are most likely three authors of the Book of Isaiah, known very imaginatively as First, Second and Third Isaiah, and today’s reading comes from Second Isaiah. In order to understand where Second Isaiah is coming from, though, we need to know a little about First Isaiah.

Isaiah of Jerusalem, First Isaiah, wrote in the eighth century BC, when Judah was in danger of being conquered by the Assyrians. It appears likely that people felt that such a tragedy could never happen to them, the people of God, because Isaiah warned the people that God could use the nations of the world in judgment, and that if the people continued to do evil they would be punished. Isaiah prophesies to the people in words that we still need to hear today: “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”² He also writes of the glories of the future time that will come when the people do live just lives, when God is with them: “He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation

¹ Camberwell: Penguin Books, 2009.

² Isaiah 1:16-17.

shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”³ These are the visions of First Isaiah, Isaiah of Jerusalem: the warning of punishment if the people continue to turn away from God; and the vision of the glorious time to come when “the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.”⁴

But the people don’t seem to have listened. The prophecies about Jerusalem’s destruction were carried out: Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonians in 587 BC, the Temple was destroyed, and two-thirds of the people were deported to Babylon. The population of Jerusalem dropped from 100,000 people to 30,000. The people who had been prosperous, confident, and materialistic were taken into exile. They wondered how God could still be with them. If they were God’s people, surely God would have saved them? Looking at the strength of the Babylonians and the weakness of the Jews, it appeared that the gods of Babylon had overpowered the God of Israel, that Yahweh was powerless. How else could Yahweh’s people be in Babylon?

It was to these people that the prophet we call Second Isaiah wrote the chapters of Isaiah that we call “The Book of Consolation”. They start with the words: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God,”⁵ and that’s the message all the way through. The people are in exile, but there is hope. Second Isaiah doesn’t write of judgment and condemnation but of comfort and trust.

This is the message of the passage that we hear today. God calls to His people “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” Those who are in exile are invited to join God in a royal banquet. Rich food here is a symbol of all the things that God’s love promises us, the things we most want: rich food when we’re hungry; flowing water when we’re thirsty; a community of all nations when we are in exile.

There are alternatives to this banquet. Just as we have the option of eating food, or edible food-like substances, so the exiles have the choice between God’s milk and wine and rich food, and “that which is not bread” and “that which does not satisfy”. They have the choice between Yahweh, their God, and all the things that the Babylonians offer them. It’s the choice offered to us all: God, or the things with which we try to replace God, things that leave us starving and thirsty and homesick. If we have everything we might want and need, but don’t have God, we’re spending our money and our labour on that which will not and cannot satisfy us. We can see it all around us and inside us, when we find that a new car, or a flat-screen TV, or success in business, or the respect and admiration of others, don’t make us happy. Nothing that we can afford through wealth or effort will bring us the joy that God gives us when we’re invited to God’s banquet to eat *real* food and enjoy a relationship with the God who loves us.

How do we get this real food? Amazingly enough, we don’t need to earn it. “Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price,” God tells the exiles. All we have to do is hunger and thirst for God, and God will satisfy us. We live in a world which is full of buying and selling, earning and receiving, cause and effect, sin and retribution, but God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are God’s ways our ways. One commentator I read this week writes: “Seeking God does not require skill, status, security, smarts, steadfastness, or any number of other positive attributes. Only one thing is required: *thirst*.”⁶ As today’s psalm says: “O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” And the psalmist finds God: “My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips”. All we need to do is seek God, and God will be found.

³ Isaiah 2:4.

⁴ Isaiah 11:6.

⁵ Isaiah 40:1.

⁶ Timothy Shapiro, *New Proclamation* 2007.

This is what Lent is, a time of seeking God. Second Isaiah advises us to seek the Lord while he may be found, and call upon him while he is near; forsaking wickedness and unrighteousness. Lent offers us a time to repent, turn again to God, give up the material things with which we try to satisfy ourselves, and abandon self-sufficiency for life with God. Giving up tea and coffee and chocolate and sugar and lollies seems trivial in the greater scheme of things, but they symbolise this bigger giving up and turning away from everything which is not God that is the meaning behind all our Lenten disciplines. Lent is a time to learn to rely totally on God, and not on anything else, material or social or emotional. Lent is a time to learn that God alone suffices.

We suffer physically when we choose edible food-like substances over real food. We suffer spiritually when we choose ourself or our possessions over God. And God does not want us to suffer! Jesus was very, very clear that God loves us, and wants us to live life in abundance. When we 'give up' things for Lent, the hope is that our lives will become richer, rather than poorer. God's message to us in the words of Second Isaiah is: "Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food." So, let's enjoy the contradictory, fast that is a feast, which is the church's season of Lent. Amen.