

Fed By Grace | Food in the Gospels

“In a Feeding Trough”

Isaiah 1.2-3; Luke 2.6-19; Psalm 81.10

(Isaiah 1) Listen, O heavens, and hear, O earth; For the LORD speaks, "Sons I have reared and brought up, but they have revolted against Me. An ox knows its owner, and a donkey its master's manger, but Israel does not know, My people do not understand."

(Luke 2) While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. ⁸ In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; ¹¹ for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² "This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased." ¹⁵ When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger.

(Psalm 81) I, the LORD, am your God, Who brought you up from the land of Egypt; Open your mouth wide and I will fill it.

Today we begin a new series of Sunday morning teachings. Just to remind you, if you've been attending St. Andrews a while OR to inform you, if you're new: we usually look at the Old Testament in the Autumn to Christmas (the season of the Father), then the Four Gospels from Christmas to Easter (the season of the Son) and from Easter through Summer the work of the Spirit in the mission and life of the Church (the NT Letters).

So, this is the season of the Son and the four Gospels, the authorized record of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ told by four historians Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

We've looked at the Gospels many different ways over the years. Sometimes we've gone right through one of them from start to finish. Other times we've focused on one section like the Sermon on the Mount (Jesus Christ's most famous teaching) or the Parables (as in last year). This year (and maybe next year too) I want to take us through a theme in the

Gospels; it's not a traditionally standard theme of study. In fact, I've never read a book devoted to the theme until recently. It's the theme of food.

I want you to know, from the start, that this isn't a gimmick or just a novelty – it really is a theme and there IS a kind of teaching that runs through the Bible, A THEOLOGY of food and eating. Eating is an essential aspect of our “creatureliness” and what it means to be alive. Every living organism depends on food...and we depend on God to give us food. So...it's not that we just ran out of ideas but I do think it's significant how food and eating are so prominent in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It really is a motif worth exploring.

Mainly, though, this is not the Food Network... this isn't a cooking class. Food is a kind of lens or a symbol or occasion pointing to something even more essential than food itself. And ultimately this is a series is about that, not so much about food but about Jesus Christ and about the grace that He gives and the work that He accomplishes. This is the season of the Son.

So, let's introduce the topic and look at #1 How food appears in the Gospels as a way of helping people respond to Jesus Christ #2 How it appears specifically in these texts #3 How we are being invited, enticed, hosted TO EAT in this coming season.

When we think of food in the Bible we go all the way to the start. In the first chapter, these words, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you...” God is a gardener – and we too. We're made to be cultivators of food; we're made needy, created with hunger and the need to eat regularly. The earth is our pantry. And of course, the Bible ends with a feast, The Marriage Feast of the Lamb.

We just considered in a recent series how Esau sold his birthright for food...for a bowl of soup. Genesis reminds us that food is precious; food is power; food moves people to do things.

There are food laws or instructions in the Old Testament...in fact a lot of laws so that when the Church in the OT ate...every time God's people sat to eat and could or couldn't eat certain things, it compelled them to think about God.

God will feed His people miraculously in the wilderness, bread from heaven, manna. And will give them to drink water from the rock...both of these are referenced again and again as the Bible unfolds.

Psalm 104 (speaking of all God's creatures), human and animal, “They all wait for You to

give them their food in due season. You give to them, they gather it up; You open Your hand, they are satisfied with good.” (27-28)

And when Jesus Christ teaches, He will often teach AT a meal. He sits with people and ...things come up. Eating is not strictly a utilitarian necessity, i.e. we're not engines that require gasoline and oil. We're not simply "re-fueling" or even, like the animals that graze or kill/eat and then move on, but for us, stuff happens at the table. We become "humanized" when we eat (you also wonder if we're becoming de-humanized when we reduce food to fuel and eat in our cars...don't sit and converse). But not so for the ideal human Being; Jesus Christ sits and talks with people.

The meals in Jesus Christ's life and ministry were some of the most significant moments. A Franciscan monk, Robert Karris makes the point that , "In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal." See, food is really important as an occasion in the life of Jesus.

And, as we'll see, He doesn't always eat with the right people!

We'll see Jesus Christ eating with righteous, religious people who...as the meals progress... start looking a bit like cannibals! And we'll see Him eat with people with whom no good or righteous man had any business eating – sinners and un-patriotic traitors! These are the kind of people who can infect you with moral disease...and yet Jesus is immune to the virus...and... even infects them with the cure.

We'll see Jesus Christ make food...like a creative act. Multiplying bread and fish...changing water into the finest wine.

There are indirect references. John the Baptist's severed head winds up on a serving platter. Jesus Christ calls people to follow Him who are in the food production business – fisherman.

Jesus will not only teach at meals but will teach about meals. His parables frequently have to do with feasting and banquets and wedding receptions. The father kills the fatted calf for food when the lost son returns.

The very short prayer that He taught when His disciples asked, "Teach us to pray", that brief prayer mentions food. In an odd construction that still has scholars puzzled, He prayed, "Give us this day the bread of this day."

He will end His great project, that very significant ministry where He wasted an inordinate amount of time with a small group of people, just twelve when there were so many needy

people, He spent most of His time with the twelve – and we'll see Him close that phase with a meal...The Last Supper. At that meal His betrayer makes himself known by a gesture involving food – he dips his bread into a bowl and thus commits himself to the path of treachery.

And after the resurrection we will meet Him again with food. He comes to the disciples in a banquet room. Again, He makes a breakfast of broiled fish and they eat by the seashore. Again, He accompanies two unnamed followers on a road to Emmaus and though they do not recognize Him... they invite Him to stay and to eat. And when He breaks the bread...something about the way He broke bread...that tips them off and they recognize Him. That's at the very end of Luke's Gospel.

But at the start, when we first look at His holy face, when the face of God first feels the air of earth, the air we breathe, we can't help notice a veiled but very significant reference to food in that connection.

"When the time was fulfilled for her to give birth..." The waiting is over, not just the nine months, but the millennia since or race fell in the Garden and God promised the Seed of the woman who would bruise the serpent's head. In the fullness of time, the Savior is born and God is become flesh.

The couple knows that this is no ordinary child but the Child of Promise, David's Son, yet David's Lord. He is a King, the King over all kings and born in David's royal city. There should be a great reception fitting a King... the whole city should stop what they're doing and bow at the door of a palace to hear word. But there is no palace... no delivery room...no well equipped clean birthing center. The city is overcrowded because Caesar has mandated... (doesn't Caesar know that the true King and Caesar's Creator is arriving?)

The city is overcrowded and there is no room for them inside the Bed and Breakfast... but in a pinch says the innkeeper, "And buddy, if you don't mind me saying, 'you're in a real pinch!'... In a pinch they could stay in the parking garage. And they do; they take what they can get. No one gives up a space for this couple in a pinch.

What kind of reception is this? Mary and Joseph must be wondering: did we just dream up this whole thing? Could God not have arranged for us? How could this be a fitting reception for the Child of Promise?

And then and there...in the garage (filled not with cars but animals) there in the stable the virgin gives birth. They make due. They wrap the firstborn son in cloths and they lay Him...in

a bassinette...or in something that might resemble a crib...a manger...God is born a Baby and the Baby is put in a bowl...like food.

The one who has always GIVEN us food, has now become the food. Three times Luke will repeat it as if to say, "Can you believe this? A manger? A manger? A manger? It's a feeding trough for animals! It's where straw and grain would be given to hungry beasts.

Isaiah the prophet had written 700 years earlier. "An ox knows its owner, and a donkey its master's manger, but Israel does not know, My people do not understand." As if to say, "dumb animals know where to get their food but God's own people do not! The animals seem to recognize that this Man is the Perfect Adam who will rule creation with kindness and justice and without cruelty. The unbroken donkey will allow this one good Man to sit on its back in the Triumphal entry. The animals recognize that God is in the manger...but the people can't and won't. They won't make room for Him.

It must have been so confusing for the couple. Until the shepherds arrive. And they tell the parents, "We were out where David used to shepherd his sheep and where he used to play his harp and sing to heaven...and for us heaven answered! Angels stood before us and told us about the Boy born to be food. The angels told us we'd find Him in a bowl...on a plate...in a feeding trough. He will be food for a spiritually starved world. The feeder has become the food." And Mary was helped by these Shepherds to know that this is not a delusion...but the great fulfillment of God's plan, "And Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart."

Later, of course, this Child would become a Man and He would say, "I am the bread of life...manna that comes down from heaven... I am the living water from a rock...take and eat!" The Bread of Life, born in Bethlehem, the "House of Bread" and laid, of all places on a plate, a feeding trough, to show that grace is come for every hungry heart.

Now in the coming days, we get to see Jesus Christ in the authorized documents, the Four Gospels. We get to hear His own words. We can walk with Him and eat with Him. But the real question is will we eat with Him...and yet fail to eat the real food which He not only gives but the food that He is?

See, the thing about Christianity and the Gospel: it's not so much an instruction to be followed ...how to live the good life or how to get to heaven ...it's not a recipe for us to make...It's a dish for us to receive, to partake, to eat. It's not Jesus Christ teaching us the good life, but Him LIVING THE GOOD LIFE for people who will never measure up. We take and eat.

Several years ago I faced a crisis of faith...while I was pastor here at St Andrews. The things I believed since becoming a Christian when I was nineteen years old, I still believed those things... but there was some sort of disconnect. The grace that I talked about and believed wasn't showing up in my emotional life. I became afraid. And I began to see how unaware I had been (probably would of gone right by that stable and noticed nothing!)

And at that time...a real low point...a kind of crisis point in my life...I began to cry out to God like never before. And little by little I began to notice that God was feeding me. And I sensed my need.

The grace of Jesus Christ was coming to me and sinking deeper into me. (You are what you eat!) The God who became flesh and the God who became food in Jesus Christ – the Bread broken for the world - He was giving Himself to me in new ways. I was hungry and God was feeding me. The Bible became urgently important. The Good News of Jesus became delicious...and digestible.

God used some of you. He used books. He used mentors, my wife and family, sermons, music; prayer became a passion. I was emboldened to talk openly about my fears and failings. And I was fed by grace.

When I look back on it, one verse sticks out above the rest, sort of explains the moment and what God was doing. Psalm 81.10, "I, the LORD, am your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt; open your mouth wide and I will fill it."

A crisis is a terrible thing to waste and I hope that if you are at a low point, you will open up and receive the God who became food. But whether you're in a crisis OR NOT we are being invited, enticed, welcomed, hosted to eat in this coming season.

Don't be filled with junk food when a feast is offered. Don't be stubborn but instead purpose in your heart right now, and pray, "Jesus Christ, don't only tell me about food – BE MY FOOD...I open my mouth...I promise to get open and honest with brothers and sisters – I open my mouth wide, do something new, feed me and fill me."

O taste and see that the Lord is good; How blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him! (Ps 34.8)