

## Sermon Archive 185

Sunday 28 January, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: 1 Corinthians 8: 1-13

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



In my mind I've been playing with an image of humanity. It's a group of people called around a single table, that they may eat together. In eating, they receive what they need in order to live. They are sustained. They're nourished. They pass food to one another, and in the act of sharing what is there, they serve and keep one another. They all need. They all eat. They all are kept. In rising from the meal, I wonder, do they all bless one another as they go? Do they remember one another, and give thanks that they have met? Do they marvel that food was on the table? Humanity. Build not a higher fence, but a bigger table . . .

-ooOoo-

Some years ago my friends in Golden Bay came back from an extended holiday in the United Kingdom, during which they'd eaten pretty much every evening meal in a pub of one sort or another. Lots of meat, cooked in lard; heavy, greasy, stodgy. Not out of conscience then, but purely out of feeling stuffed and sick, they decided, upon coming home, to take a break from eating meat. Over time, the "break" became "sustained practice", and these days they only eat fish. If you ask them what they eat, they say "fish only - we're pescatarian". If, however, someone out of the loop has prepared in ignorance something meaty, they will try to eat it. They do this because they don't want to offend, and because it's not an ethical thing for them. It's a wellness thing. Shall we invite them to the table?

For my cousin Sarah, the decision to become vegetarian **was** an ethical matter. A long term lover of animals, one day she just decided that she didn't want animals slaughtered for her culinary benefit. While I sometimes, on my farmyard duties at Orana Park, will look Jill the kunekune pig in the eye, think of dinner, and say "Sorry Jill", Sarah wants none of that. While I might say sorry to the lambs, to the ducks, to the chickens, to the cows, Sarah says "No. Not in my name". And because it's a matter of conscience, she won't bend the rule. If

people are offended by her refusing to eat, she considers that to be **their** problem. I cook Sarah tofu. I'm not sure where she stands on eggs. Let's pull up a chair for Sarah.

For my friend, Tony, it's not so much an ethical matter; it's a religious one. It's part of his Buddhist faith. He gave up meat as he began to believe in the unity of all living things. It's about animals having just as much a right to life as human beings do - because they, like us, are sentient beings. And Tony's bar for sentience is pretty low. He refuses to use fly spray - since flies, ants and other insects have brains. Tony, welcome to the table.

For Mohammed, from down the road, who's also religious, it's not about sentience. It's about giving proper thanks to God for the blessings we receive. If you haven't given proper thanks for something, then you shouldn't be eating it. The requirements for proper thanks are taken from halal regulations. "Halal", coming from the same word from which we get "Hallelujah", involves a Muslim meatworker, facing the direction of Mecca, slaughtering quickly, while saying "Bismillah" - "bismillah meaning "in the name of God". Animals that have died accidentally, or of natural causes, are off the menu for Mohammed. Shall we set a place for him?

To the casual observer, I might appear to be a person who will eat anything. It's not quite true. I don't buy battery eggs. I only buy free-range chicken. That's me taking an animal welfare stand. Although I'm happy to eat animals, I'm not happy if they suffer. Also, I try not to buy fruit that's come from overseas - not because I'm xenophobic, but because the carbon footprint for flying a lemon from America to New Zealand, for instance, is just huge. It's about the environment.

I go back to the earlier image of humanity being people called to share food at a table. I go back to playing with the idea of human beings sharing, nourishing one another, sitting together and giving thanks.

But now I've brought together this impossibly complicated group of diners. What on earth are we ever going to eat? For at the table we have beliefs and sensitivities, competing principles and concerns - different ideas about what matters, and why it matters - or doesn't. And we haven't yet received Mr Hashimoto, bearing his generous cultural delicacy of whale meat. Tradition, culture, ancient right. Food as a symbol of the challenge facing the human race! Food as an expression of how hard it is for us to live together. How can

we ever come to the table and be fed? Perhaps we're going to need smaller, separate tables. Perhaps it is a matter of building fences, not a bigger table. Maybe the challenge is actually rather too great.

Paul found himself drawn into a fight about food. Well, initially it appeared to be about food.

In Corinth, the big diverse, multicultural city where he'd planted a church, a lot of the food on offer, especially meat, had been sacrificed to idols. It had been done either privately by a meat producer, much like Mohammed's Halal slaughterman down the road, or publically in any of the many temples to any of the many Greek gods. Zeus, Poseidon, Apollo, Artemus. Surplus meat from the temples was regularly sold through the markets, so in Corinth it would have been really common to be offered sacrificed meat. In some ways, because sacrificed meat was everywhere, it makes sense for the question to arise in Corinth. But in another way, the question is odd. Most members of the Corinthian community were gentiles. They hadn't grown up in the Jewish faith that was full of laws about prohibited food. They'd never been what you might call religiously neurotic about eating. But suddenly there's a lack of confidence about food. I wonder where that's coming from. Paul is called to sort it out.

Because Paul is an intelligent person, and because his first impulse in response to a question is to go to reason, he starts to think the matter through. OK. What do we know? We know that the one God made us, and that God has come close to us in Jesus. I think we know that we love God. We know also that none of the gods to whom the food has been sacrificed really exist. We know that food won't bring us close to God; nor will it take us far away. Food, then, with respect to our standing with God, will make us neither better off, nor worse off. So really, it doesn't matter. QED; reason says "if you want to, just eat it".

Thank you, reason. At my table, with pescatarians, vegetarians, Buddhists, Muslims and whale eaters, I wonder how the application of reason would go. Could there be some flash of intelligence, some perfect winning argument, that could bring us all together? And remember that food is just a metaphor for the greater challenges before humanity. Can reason fix our clashing concerns, our competing anxieties, our different feelings about what's

important? Could somebody suddenly have a brilliant idea that would make us one? As the table gets bigger and the fences crash down, that'd be a huge victory for knowledge!

Paul, knows, however, that knowledge isn't going to be enough. In fact, quite often, so notes Paul, knowledge often only makes one person feel smarter and another more stupid. Paul has seen knowledge drive people apart. You win the argument, but lose the relationship. I told you I was right . . .

Paul changes gear. He's given his argument. He's applied his knowledge. He now says to the Corinthians "just take care. As you choose your path of liberty, and do what you have chosen to do, think about the others at the table. There are people here. They are people loved deeply by the Christ you follow, and made by the God you worship. These are people who are dealing with all sorts of crises of confidence. They may indeed be deeply frightened by the gods you don't believe in. See it not so much as about food and gods. See it as a matter of people. It's about living considerately with other people."

Paul sums up, saying "Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall". It's not about food. It's about people.

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