



## **The One Who Eats this Bread Will Live Forever**

**A sermon by Revd Richard Carter**

### **Reading: John 56 - 69**

For my holiday this summer I went camping in Normandy with my brother and his wife and my niece and nephew- Molly and Jack. For a special treat one evening we went out to a French restaurant for an evening meal which had been recommended to us by a local wine and cheese seller as being “superb”. We drove the seven km to a small village where the restaurant was situated. When we were set down Jack, my 10 year old nephew was told he could have the children’s menu. I couldn’t help noticing how crestfallen and disappointed he looked.

“What’s wrong Jack?” I asked, Jack was silent. “You don’t have to have the children’s menu -you can have whatever you want.” I told him.

“Well you see Uncle Richard,” he said “as I’m in France I wanted to have either snails or frogs’ legs.” “Well I’ll see what I can do”, I said and called over the manager of the restaurant and asked in English but with a very good French accent if they had any frogs legs’ or snails for my nephew. The manageress looked delighted “naturalament” she replied and Ten minutes later reappeared with a beautiful white dish of snails. Jack looked as if he was heaven and while we teased him that he would soon grow a shell and leave a snail trail all the way home- Jack proceeded to eat every one. I tell you this story because I might be his Uncle but I was incredibly proud of him. There are not many English 10 year olds I thought who would not only eat a whole bowl of snails but actually of their own volition decide to do it because they wanted to experience life in France. Jack age ten was eating up a different culture and a new way of doing things- and not only to his own obvious delight but to the delight of the manageress and the waiters in the restaurant and the story even spread back to the village we were camping: “Ah le petit garçon qui mange des escargots!”- which literally translated means: “the little boy who eats snails!”

Eating is incredibly important not just for sustenance- it is often sacrament- an outward visible sign of an inner unity and grace. Think of a child at a table who wants to rebel or express anger or frustration or a mood. The child refuses to eat. Think of someone who goes on hunger strike as an expression of anger or rebellion. Your choice to eat, or to refuse to eat, is something that others cannot control. A few months ago I had some guests and I went to a lot of trouble preparing an evening meal for them. One of the guests simply picked at the food I had prepared and left nearly the whole plate uneaten. She apologised and said that she wasn’t hungry but despite the apology I found it difficult to warm to this guest- of course I tried to make it look as though it did not matter, but when you prepare a meal for someone you are offering something of yourself and in receiving that offering a bond is formed. There is a woman in our congregation, whose name I won’t mention because she is far too modest and would be embarrassed who gives the most wonderful dinners. It begins with a sherry when you arrive. Then you are led to a meticulously laid table, where she has prepared a starter, a main course and a delicious pudding and then she offers you a cheese board and a long list of lacquers and when you leave the house she thanks you profusely for being kind enough to come for the evening. Thanks you!

Hospitality is a gift a gift of God. In the flat upstairs my neighbours have that gift of hospitality and Loren is the most wonderful cook. Being invited to their house is to be overwhelmed with generosity and Loren’s delicious cooking –with flavours which stretch from Croatia to Thailand. But hospitality doesn’t have to be a banquet either, it can be about something as simple as sharing bread- A companion is one who shares bread. Communion is about giving and receiving: about reciprocity beyond and deeper than words. I thought about this with my mother on Friday. The carer said she

wasn't well and wouldn't eat anything but when I sat with her and gently helped her she ate every mouthful. It was an expression of an unspoken bond.

Soon after becoming Chaplain of the Melanesian Brotherhood in the South Pacific I went on a long Christmas Mission with the Brothers. I must have preached in about 15 different churches and given talks and teaching every night for about three weeks. After the mission it was not the talks, or the sermons, or the teaching that was mentioned- the news that came back to the Melanesian Brotherhood was this: "Your new English Chaplain is OK. He eats our food." After the period of national conflict in the Solomon Islands during which 7 members of my community who were working as peacemakers were killed- the loss and memories of the violence was so great that I arranged for the help of two trauma counsellors from Australia to come help the community find healing and peace. During that time one of the counsellors worked with me. I remember one of the sessions in which she invited me to imagine a safe place a place in my life, a place of healing and hope and to describe that place to her. The place I remember describing to her was my kitchen and in my imagination I remember many people entering that kitchen and sharing food and eating, so many in fact that the door was like a stable door swinging to and fro- and in the kitchen I was cooking a large pot of rice and a stew that never seemed to run out. I was handing out plates of food so grateful that those who entered the kitchen were receiving so gratefully. There was in the vision a relaxed and life-giving reciprocity.

Thinking back ten years later in retrospect- I am surprised how that vision has continued here in St Martin's. Yesterday a group of 35 volunteers and refugees from this church ate fish and chips together and then ice creams together on the beach in Brighton- it was a joyful communion, after this service there will be another sharing of food and cold drinks from our hospitality committee in the hall and then another food sharing at the Sunday International Group at the Connection. Later in the week the Archers will meet for a shared meal and next week Club Wednesday will meet for lunch. Downstairs in the café in the crypt many people will be sharing food. After the service the family and friends of Charlie will be celebrating his baptism and the joy of his coming into the world with food and drink. Tonight I will be sharing food with two dear friends who have come to visit from Australia. They are in church today so if they are listening I hope they will eat every mouthful I give them! Later here in this service we will be sharing the most important food of all- the body and blood of Christ. What could be more intimate than that?

I have been talking about this eating together because in our faith it matters. It is a sign of our shared humanity. A sign of giving, a sign of receiving, a sign of becoming, a sign of blessing. This eating together is not fast food or take-away. It is something which expresses covenant and relationship and presence. Think how much of Christ's own life focuses on the sharing of food and drink- the wedding at Cana, where the young Christ creates abundance-similarly the feeding of the 4000, the feeding of the 5000, the feast the father prepares for the prodigal son in Jesus' parable to express the joy at his son's return, the meal with Mary and Martha, when Martha does all the work while Mary sits at their guest's feet, or when Jesus invites himself to the house of Zacchaeus as a sign that he too can be forgiven, or the last Supper where Christ calls upon his disciples to break bread and share wine in remembrance of him. Or think about the shared meal of those on the Road to Emmaus where the breaking of bread becomes a sign that Christ has risen, or the resurrection breakfast by the Sea of Galilee after the catch of fish- fish which become a sign of bursting, flashing new life.

Again and again a shared meal becomes the stage- for the expression of a relationship that goes far beyond words. When Jesus tries to describe that relationship it still shocks us. He says "those who eat my flesh and drink my blood, abide in me and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me- the one who eats this bread will live forever." Jesus is taking the most simple of human daily action- the eating of bread and he is filling that action with the meaning of life itself. It is the expression of our covenant with God- our

covenant with one another. I wonder if we can meditate more upon that as we come to this Eucharist today. It is simply bread and wine that we receive fruit of the earth, work of human hands- but it is also the gift of God's eternity. It is the action of God alive in you: Bless take give, bless take give. Not an appendage, not a ritual, not a set of instructions but God life digested into your own flesh and blood.

Today in this service we witness two sacraments in which we do what Jesus did. The baptism of Charlie in which in the symbol of water Charlie has entered into the family of Christ and been called through his parents and God parents to walk in Christ's love and light. And then the sacrament of Eucharist- the sign of Christ present for each one of us. But there is a third sacrament often overlooked - you. You are the sacrament- the one called to be the outward visible sign of God's love, forgiveness and compassion. Like Charlie the bearer of Christ.

A few weeks ago I asked you who you would share your five loaves and two fish with in the following week. I repeat that challenge today. In Christ you are called to become sacrament. The expression of the mystery of God's love. Imagine who you will share food with this week- your child, your family, friends, colleagues, on the move or alone or in quietness. I wonder who you imagine sitting at your table. Perhaps someone new, perhaps someone you would like to know better. Perhaps someone old, perhaps someone who needs forgiveness and it's hard to invite. Perhaps yourself. Perhaps when you imagine Christ at your table. As you eat I wonder how that food can become a sign of blessing, a sign of communion of our lives offered as gift, a sign of the gift of life received beyond our imagining.