

Reflection Notes – 6/8/17

- *Geoff Stevenson*

When There Is Enough For All and All Are Equal...

There is nothing so simultaneously strange and wonderful as the traditional, so-called 'pot luck church dinner'. It is a common enough event where everyone brings some food to share. People bring as they are able, both in terms of capability and cost. There are those for whom life is a bit tight and bring something simpler. Others love to cook and bake up a storm. Others have little time and buy something nice to share.

The thing with pot luck dinners is you never know what is going to turn up. You can't control the menu nor even predict it. Sometimes there is more dessert than main course and other times nibbles – crackers and dip... - dominate. Sometimes there is a balance between the salads and hot food and often not. Sometimes there is more finger food and other times stews, soups, rice and so on are the go. It is always a lottery what you will get and whether it all complements each other or not.

The wonderful thing about these dinners is the mystery and surprise at what people bring. It is also the equalising potential of these meals. Everyone is welcome and invited to contribute or not. At the table everyone is equal and shares equally in the food regardless of what is brought. At these meals there have been wealthy, powerful and successful people sitting alongside the poor, vulnerable and struggling and everyone in between. At this table no one is better, worse, greater or least. All are one and there is always enough to go round regardless of how many turn up – this is one of the true miracles that enough food is always provided regardless of who turns up and how hungry they are!!

This mysterious kaleidoscope of food varieties serves as the backdrop for sharing and relationship. Over the meal an equally rich variety of conversations takes place. They range from the sublime to the ridiculous. There are deep conversations about issues that are tough. There are funny stories that bring raucous laughter. There are surprising revelations from people's lives, unknown but revealed in a trusting, open environment. These simple but profound meals often seem bizarre and odd but they are a deeply and profoundly significant metaphor for how the world could work – if only we learned to share, love, trust and be inclusive. At their best these are open, inclusive, welcoming places where food and drink flow freely and are devoured joyfully, a foretaste of the banquet in God's Reign.

There are many occasions when food and drink feature as a central and fundamental basis for community and relationships. They help us talk, celebrate, remember, laugh and cry together. We sit side by side sharing stories as we fill our mouths. We receive the nourishment of food for the body but share in relational experiences that nurture our emotional well-being. In our midst God is present in the mystery and wonder, as we eat and drink together, breaking bread as a form of communion (Holy Communion, as it is usually called). Several years ago when Susan was working at Parramatta Mission and used to visit the soup kitchen they ran, a woman sat down and began to talk to her. The woman said, at one point, 'Since coming to the kitchen over the last few months, I have begun to feel much better within myself. I'm not sure whether this is because I am getting

a good meal each day or because I have people around me to talk to. Perhaps it is both?' Food and people together around a table feeds our body, mind and spirit.

For me this is a wonderful vision of hope for our world. If more people gathered around meals of shared food and drink, with stories and relationships, tears and laughter, in an inclusive, open manner, the world would be a more hopeful and peaceful place. There would be more understanding as the sharing of food and relationships across the divides and differences between people unifies and deepens awareness, trust and understanding. Imagine if we could meet those we least understand or even fear over a table of food each has provided? Imagine if we could have a safe place to listen, share and learn together about the world and its mysteries and wonder. Imagine if we had a space where love overwhelmed difference, fear and uncertainty and brought us together in a manner that celebrated the equality and uniqueness of each person.

This week the story of Jesus (Matthew 14:13-21) comes after he receives the bad news of the death of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod, the local king. Jesus went off into a quiet place to grieve, pray and think. There were crowds of ordinary people who were needed the grace and healing of Jesus' ministry and they followed him. Feeling a sense of compassion and connection he spoke with them and provided a healing presence in their lives. As the day wore on the disciples expressed their concern for the people and suggested that Jesus send them to local villages to purchase food for themselves. There was a huge crowd and they couldn't begin to provide food.

This is a metaphor for us and our world. There are many crying out for something. They hurt or have need or are weary and troubled. They need to be fed something that nourishes their being and fills the deep need in their lives. The need is great, vast and beyond what we know we can do. Where to begin in this large, weary, hurting world?

In the story, Jesus told his disciples to help the people and they were surprised, stunned and afraid because it was an enormous task beyond their capacity. So Jesus took what they had and gave thanks, broke it and gave it out to the people. Everyone ate and was satisfied. This story is about God's love and grace that reaches out to the world in practical ways to nourish, feed, nurture and give life to all. The image is of a world that has great and diverse need gathered around the table of God sharing food together. There is enough food for everyone and it restores body, mind and spirit. The healing and hope lie in being part of the inclusive community where everyone is welcomed, equal and loved. The food is physical, emotional and spiritual. It is relational and trusting, open and respectful, caring and compassionate.

This story holds the image of a world that comes together and learns to respect, care, trust and be compassionate towards each other. Around this table there is no-one who is greater nor least. All are equal though different and diverse. There is enough for everyone and no-one has too much. Those who have too much in ordinary life, share with those who have too little so that all have enough. Instead of people competing with one another and using violent means to gain more, we find a place where we are satisfied and recognise the importance of relationships over material wealth. Life becomes a shared and communal experience where we look out for one another and care for the earth and its creatures. This is a picture of God's grace that sustains the creation and provides sufficient for a hungry world. In our midst is God's mystery, wonder and grace.