

On Sundays, the first reading, taken from the Old Testament, almost always has the same theme – either in word or image – as the gospel. Today is no exception... and that theme is food – specifically food eaten at a banquet or a celebration or a wedding feast. In the first reading, when the prophet Isaiah says ‘this mountain’ he means Mount Zion, which is a hill in Jerusalem, just outside the walls of the old city; but the name was also used in the Old Testament descriptively, to refer to the City of David and, a bit later, the Temple Mount. It is still venerated by Jews, Christians and Muslims.

So the name is used by Isaiah as a symbol... and this passage is a symbolic prophecy, using the images of rich food and fine wine – the ultimate comfort for all who are impoverished, persecuted, vagrant or sick. He assures the people that Mount Zion will be their everlasting home, their eternal nourishment and healing; even death will be abolished and there will be no more mourning, no more tears. He declares: “... for the hand of the Lord rests on this mountain.”

And this is not the only time the prophet uses the images of food:

“Lo! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
And you who have no money come, buy and eat.
Come, buy wine and milk
Without money and without cost.

Why do you spend money for what is not bread,
And your wages for what does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good,
And delight yourself in abundance.”

(Is 55:1-320)

In fact, the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, which contains 66 chapters, was written or compiled over a period of two hundred years, so obviously they couldn't all be by the same person. Today's reading is taken from a later addition to the work of the original prophet Isaiah, who lived in the 8th century BC and was one of the greatest of all the Hebrew prophets; this passage, using the imagery of fine food and choice wine, was written about 500BC to comfort and console the people, who may have been struggling to re-establish their cultural and religious identity after returning from exile in Babylon.

This is biblical history: the really telling point is that the prophet uses food as his chief means of bringing consolation. The richness of God's Word can lead us into a deeper meaning, if we know where to look.

And so it is with the gospel reading, in which Jesus tells the parable of the king who gave a feast for his son's wedding but none of the invited guests wanted to come. It is not hard to see the allegorical meaning here: God is the king who is giving the wedding feast; Jesus is the son, the bridegroom, for whom it is being given. The feast itself

represents eternal life and salvation; the servants who went out to call the guests to the feast represent the prophets of the Old Testament and the wedding guests who rejected the invitation – even killing the servants – represent the Jews who so often turned away from the promises of God. As a result of this, the banquet for the King's son was opened to all people, even those who might be thought to be least worthy in the eyes of the world.

This understanding of the parable is undoubtedly the way Jesus *intended* his listeners to understand it... and we should not let its straightforwardness make us forget how angry, how vindictive it would have made them feel: the scribes and the Pharisees and the religious status quo knew that the Lord was referring to them. Small wonder they plotted to do away with him. And yet – and yet! – the fact that Jesus used the image of food and feasting can, if we think about it, likewise lead us to a deeper appreciation of its meaning.

The number of times in the Old Testament that food and feasting, or a banquet, is associated with some significant event in the history of the Hebrew people are many and varied; the Exodus itself began with a meal and Passover has been celebrated every Sabbath by Jewish homes ever since; almost every important religious festival in the Jewish calendar involves food: the feast of First Fruits (the third day after Passover), the feast of Weeks (harvest time), the feast

of Tabernacles (living in the fields to celebrate their produce) and the Feast of Trumpets (when the people rest and food is presented to God). This is just scratching the surface.

In the ancient Middle East, hospitality was supremely important: life was frequently nomadic and travelling perilous; to offer food, drink and shelter to the journeying stranger was considered a holy duty because it could often be a matter of life or death. In fact, strict codes of social and religious conduct were developed to govern such hospitality. Following these codes, Abraham welcomed three travelling 'strangers' (Gen 18:1-8) into his tent. He provided them with water to wash their dusty feet and a place to rest; the preparation of the food he offers them is described in almost loving detail: he tells Sarah, his wife, to knead their finest flour – about 30lbs of it! – into fresh-baked bread, he kills and roasts a calf and presents them, too, with yoghurt and milk. He was, as they say, 'entertaining angels unawares' and the reward for his lavish hospitality was the prediction *and* birth of a son to Sarah, already advanced in years. It reminds us of the words of Psalm 23: "You have prepared a banquet for me in the sight of my foes..."

In the gospels, Jesus uses the images and examples of food and banquets many times to illustrate his teaching: bread, oil, wine, fish, salt – and he gave his first 'sign' at the Marriage Feast of Cana. He multiplied loaves and fishes. He had dinner (much to the Pharisees' disgust) with tax-collectors and prostitutes – the scribes and Pharisees even

called him a glutton and a drunkard. He referred to himself as the bread of life and left us a continuation of his Presence on earth in the form of Eucharistic bread; even now at Mass, we are accounted blessed to be called to the *supper* of the Lamb. After his resurrection, the Lord ate both bread and fish in the presence of his disciples – in other words, food assured them that he was real.

There can be little doubt that historically, socially, scripturally and spiritually, food and preparing food, offering hospitality and the sharing of a meal is in every way instinctive and archetypal – that is, a blueprint or a template present from the beginning in the fabric of the human psyche. That template is filled out and given flesh by individual human experience; but the *design* of it has been there forever. Small wonder the kingdom of heaven is most often likened to an eternal banquet: it is the closest visual metaphor we have to the collective joy of that kingdom.

As a reasonable (I hope!) cook and as someone who loves cooking for myself and other people, I know that food can be an instrument not just of social but also of spiritual grace. Food can be a sacramental – that is, not a sacrament but nevertheless a means of reminding us of the presence of God – like holy water or a crucifix. There are other sacramentals, too, that can be conduits of grace: music, art, literature, friendship; these, of course, are *intended* to be sacramentals – it is only moral perversity that sometimes

uses them for contrary purposes. This perversity is represented in myth and fairy tale by the evil Queen Grimhilde, who gave Snow White a poisoned apple: what should have been sweet was made sour by jealousy. Most of us will recognize that experience at some time or other in our lives. One of my very favourite films is *Babette's Feast*, made in 1987 and based on a short story by the Danish writer Karen Blixen, who also wrote *Out of Africa*. Two very pious sisters live in a remote village on the desolate coast of Jutland, ruled with a rod of iron by their strict and unforgiving father, a Lutheran pastor. The village is divided by family and religious loyalties and life is bleak, austere, joyless. Until, that is, a French refugee comes to work as their cook. One day she wins the lottery and proposes to use the money cooking a feast, a banquet, for the village. She sends to France for recipes and ingredients and, practically living in the kitchen for days, she eventually produces this stunning, luxurious dinner of classical French cuisine for people whose usual daily fare is porridge oats and smoked herring. At first suspicious, they are gradually, slowly, bit by bit, transformed by the food. Watching the film is like listening to today's reading from Isaiah: old enmities are forgotten, injuries forgiven, foes are reconciled, tears wiped away and the radiance of shared human joy fills the dining room of the house in that dark, joyless village. The meal prepared by the French cook is truly a sacramental. It also costs her – much to

the incredulity of the two sisters – her entire lottery winnings. Marvellous stuff.

Preparing, cooking and offering a meal – with strangers or with friends – is an act of grace when it is done with love; and sometimes it is just as easy to love the stranger as it is to love a friend – we just don't try it enough to know. Before my brother set out last September on his *solo* circumnavigation of the globe (now safely hunkered down in Fiji before the hurricane season arrives), he came and had a final dinner here with me. I cooked him everything he liked best. That meal was grace-filled and loving, even for a man like Tony, who believes in nothing except the physical, the material. It was the finest way I could ever have said *Bon voyage*. He did not know it (he will some day) but that occasion was a sacramental.

Do not ask me what the man without the wedding garment means, because I do not know – nobody does, not even the cleverest of scripture scholars. Many have made guesses, yes, but one is as good as another. Some have said that the missing garment is love, others that the final sentences are actually a later addition to the original parable – but for me it doesn't matter greatly. However, it does want to make me ask myself a question – which is this: What garment, what apparel, what covering aspect or quality or virtue does my soul *not* have, for which I would be thrown out of the eternal banqueting hall?