

I spend quite a lot of time thinking about food. It's pretty basic to who we are as human beings, indeed to all creation. We are what we eat, comes to mind. And Jesus uses this everyday need as a springboard to a much deeper need that we all have for meaning. It's not enough that we're here to eat, to survive the day, to reproduce. We have a purpose, an aim, an object in view. When the Israelites find they are in a desert and the food runs out they revert to survival mode and forget this larger perspective. They begin to grumble and the Lord provides, meets this basic need but only in order to remind the Israelites of their larger need, their original purpose. Jesus repeats this in his feeding of the five thousand but again the larger purpose is quickly forgotten. The crowds now follow him because he's become a sign to them of material abundance, a sign promising food security and gospel prosperity. And so Jesus challenges them with a sign so radical that many will be driven away. I am your food, he says. You have to eat me if you are to live. I am your bread. John has no account of the Last Supper but places its meaning here between the feeding of the five thousand and the Feast of Tabernacles when it's clear that for Jesus to go to Jerusalem now is to risk death. So, far from an invitation to future prosperity on earth Jesus is promising himself as food for a journey that will end in sacrificial death. So the Good News is bad news if one's focus is on this world only, or rather on this world only for oneself. Because the breaking of the bread is significant also of the breaking of our own bodies in the service of others. But surely this is intolerable language and we quickly want to take the edge off it with numerous qualifications: we're not doormats after all, obedience has its limits, we're not to look for suffering for its own sake. All good and necessary qualifications but the injunction to love, which the eucharist is all about, necessarily involves a certain suffering: the surrender of one's own will, the close attention to the needs of others before the satisfaction of one's own, the sharing of one's own resources, and so on. This is not an easy journey – but possible “in Christ”. Indeed not making any sense at all unless we are “in Christ”, baptised into his life and death, into his journey, one bread, one body. It's a journey then none of us makes alone, and the paradox and the beauty of it is that it reinvests this world with its full meaning – matter matters because of Christ, we are not here for ourselves only because “in Christ” everyone and everything matters, is linked, depends upon one another, is what creation is for. It's a radical vision and always has been. Food for thought and deed.

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