

**Fights About Food**  
**Or The Power of Good Ritual**  
**22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday, Year B**  
**30 August 2009**

Some years ago, when a stair dancer visited the St Peters, Willis St Vicarage with criminal intent, and then the police caught him a few hours later, I got invited to a family case conference, as part of the process of sorting out what to do about the offender. The boy's Father had a plan to get him into a job in a new location while living with him. But as the conversation turned to what their life together would be like after work was over the gaps began to show up. Their family life had no tradition of sitting down to a meal together at which conversation took place, and in which news and views were shared. That meant that peer group influence was high and parental influence was low because convenience food was bolted down, and the boy was off out with his mates before any significant family interaction took place. All of us were encouraging of at least one well prepared meal together taking place each week, but you could tell from the Father's puzzled, skeptical look that it was highly unlikely that this radical innovation would happen.

I wonder how many New Zealand households have lost the habit of eating together in the evening? I suspect that television is the dining companion of many as they eat off trays on their knees in a solitary experience that ignores the people they live with. Customs about meals are powerful shapers of behaviour and culture. Food is a metaphor for the

quality of our social interactions. No wonder it is often a source of controversy in communities.

Fights about food are the background to those puzzling words on the lips of Jesus in Mark's gospel this morning. Jews mark themselves out as distinctive people with elaborate eating codes. As the early Church grows out of this matrix it has to decide which of these rituals it will keep and which it will discard. Different communities did different things. Some churches kept all the Jewish laws, combined with faith in Jesus - some kept some Jewish laws - some almost none, especially the gentile churches started by Paul.

But even the decision to drop the Jewish food laws didn't stop fights over food. At Corinth Sunday worship consisted of a "bring a plate" meal called the love feast, in the middle of which the Eucharist was at some point celebrated. But there was trouble with rich people bringing food and customs that shamed poor people, with heavy drinkers becoming intoxicated, and with others taking the whole thing so lightly that the solemnity of the Eucharist was undermined.

Out of these turbulent experiences has come a determination by the Church to have good ground rules about the ordering of its worship, especially at the sacred meal we share in every Sunday. The customs we observe, the ceremonial and the rituals we use, matter because they shape the quality of our worship. And it is always worth asking, as Jesus did this morning, whether these house rules are essential, or whether they are a complicating irrelevance.

Anthony de Mallo had a story about the guru and his cat. When the guru led his disciples in worship and

meditation sessions his cat would wander in and make himself at home in the middle of the proceedings. After the guru died his disciples wouldn't start a worship and meditation session unless the cat was present. When the cat died it was stuffed and given a place of honour in the meditation hall.

As the liturgical movement has worked its way through the life of the mainline churches over the past one hundred years it has asked some hard questions about some of the customs and accretions that have crept in to our worship. Always it seeks to simplify, and to concentrate on the essentials.

So as the Service starts we do not waste time on overdoing the greetings, the confession, and the song of praise, but get to the readings as soon as possible. What matters in this first part of the Service is hearing the story of what makes us a people who love God. That is where the time and attention should go. And as we move into the second half of the Service, as bread and wine are placed on the table, we keep it simple. We do not over elaborate this simple action, and indeed I cut out some of the words in the Prayer book. What matters in the second half of the Service is the Great Thanksgiving prayer. So we do not allow the offertory to become a mini rite in itself, which anticipates and duplicates in microcosm the Great Thanksgiving prayer that we are about to move to.

But my main concern this morning is to point to the death of ritual outside the Church, and the way in which it is impoverishing us all. We live in a society in which informality reigns supreme. You can see it in the casual dress codes that often obtain at weddings. But it is at the reception afterwards that things often

start to wear thin. I remember one such occasion where the photographer turned to me and said, “They haven’t done anything about the speeches, so you are going to have to be the MC, and propose the toasts.”

I am not arguing for a return to Victorian formality, but I am worried that in a hundred little ways we are losing the culture, the habits, and the skills of hospitality – and the arts too of making an occasion out of the big events in our life. Maybe that is why the film “Barbette’s Feast,” impressed us so much. She went to so much trouble, and she knew what to do.

Here again I am not urging us to all take out a subscription to Cuisine magazine, or to start throwing dinner parties right, left and centre. It is just that we are followers of someone who made feasts, and dinners, and meals, the centerpiece of his ministry. The friend of sinners met them most often around food. He was prepared to break the rules about who righteous people should break bread with. So he has set us on a course of fights about food for as long as the world lasts. For good ritual has the power to move us from one place to another. A simple meal that brings a family together is a great thing. A well thought through wedding reception that honours the couple, and their families, is a significant achievement. And a well-organised sacred meal that puts us in touch with God is worth getting up for on Sunday morning.