FOOD AND HOSPITALITY

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The two angels came to Sodom in the evening while Lot was sitting by the city gate. When he saw them, he rose to meet them and bowing low, he said, 'I pray you, sirs, turn aside to your servant's house to spend the night there and bathe your feet. You can continue your journey in the morning.' 'No,' they answered, 'we shall spend the night in the street.' But Lot was so insistent that they accompanied him into his house. He prepared a meal for them, baking unleavened bread for them to eat. (Gen 19:1–3)

ANCIENT JEWISH TRADITION, hallowed in the holiness code, demanded that hospitality be offered (if necessary, insisted upon – as in the case of Lot) as a command of God: 'When an alien resides with you in your land, you must not oppress him. He is to be treated as a native born among you. Love him as yourself, because you were aliens in Egypt' (Lev 19:33).

Jewish women for generations have been brought up to see feeding others as inseparable from Jewish identity, tradition, law and holiness. Many traditional Jewish foods embody potent religious symbols, and the very acts of food preparation are rituals which imbue their everyday work with holiness, creating a wholeness, an 'at-one-ness' between the sacred and the everyday matter of life. This very same hospitality was urged on the early Christians who were told not to grumble about hospitality (1 Pet 4:9) but to share their food and their clothes with the poor and needy. The Greek word *philoxenia* means 'love of strangers', so in this way hospitality was the act of the community for the community – no one was to be left out (Acts 4:32).

Hospitality as love

From birth – if we have a 'good enough' mother (to use D. W. Winnicott's term) – we discover through our mother's milk that food and love are one and the same thing. As we grow older we discover that there are other ways of loving, and although we learn that food may sometimes be merely fuel, deep down there is a longing to re-experience the unity of the two and with it the warm welcome into an alien and often hostile world. This is surely the biblical meaning of

hospitality – welcoming strangers into one's family where love in edible form and food lovingly prepared are served as a unity.

Hospitality, by its very nature, is a holistic concept. It is about treating the person as a whole, not just the stomach and the senses. But we are living in an age of 'specialisms': we have made a virtue out of splitting things up into smaller and smaller parts. To restrict hospitality to food alone (although food is the theme of this issue) would be therefore to comply with the compartmentalizing which is so endemic in western society today.

Hospitality today

Today, hospitality is secularized – it is an industry and American companies are particularly conscientious about teaching their employees to treat customers as honoured guests. (The Disney corporation has a 'university' precisely to teach courtesy, good manners and how to make customers feel 'at home'.) The sacred and the secular, as in so many areas of life, are separated. The middle classes, and women in particular, are brought up to believe that hospitality, like good manners, is an essential part of good – though not necessarily 'holy' or specifically Christian – behaviour. However, there is a fundamental difference between the hospitality of two thousand years ago and that of today. Hospitality is no longer the means by which the community includes strangers and 'aliens'. Indeed, hospitality – however it may be demonstrated – has become, consciously or unconsciously, the means by which a group defines who belongs to it and who does not. In like manner, hospitality is no longer something which the individual gratefully receives. Rather, in some respects, the individual chooses whether to accept hospitality or not. For in the present age what one chooses or does not choose to eat has become fraught with symbolic dangers, not only in terms of perceived dangers to personal health and well-being but also to an individual's ethical considerations. Whereas once the holiness code was the means by which the Jewish *community* identified itself as a *community*, now, in our highly individualized society, food is a principal means by which the individual identifies the *self* – a sort of 'if I know what I eat, then I know who I am'. Under such conditions it can be very difficult for the well-meaning, but unwary, to practise hospitality!

Hospitality or commensality?

It would be naïve to suggest that hospitality in the Judaeo-Christian tradition (and others) has always been wholly altruistic. Who one

chooses to eat and drink with – commensality – has been a time-honoured way of establishing the kith and kinship system, and such rules usually run parallel with those governing sexual relationships, so that those with whom you eat correspond to those whom you can marry.[1] Under the rules of commensality, shared meals carry with them mutual obligations for the participants, so that there is no such thing as a 'free lunch'.

True hospitality is therefore quite different because, unlike commensality, it carries with it no expectation of any kind of return. In Luke's Gospel (14:12) Jesus instructs his host that the way to happiness is not to invite friends, relations and rich neighbours to a meal – they will simply return the invitation (commensality) – but to ask 'the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind', i.e. those who cannot fulfil such social obligations.

To anthropologists all gifts are a demonstration of one's place within one's culture and, as such, gifts carry with them an expectation of some kind of return – even if, as in the case of offering a meal, it is simply the pleasure gained from being a good host.[2] 'Hospitality' is therefore a word which is often used when what is actually meant is 'commensality'.

Hospitality: not just food and drink

When food is to convey love – as is the intention in hospitality – it cannot be treated as mere fuel. Creating an appropriate mood is essential to both happy love-making and good digestion. When we know we are to be offered hospitality we prepare for the eating as much as the food is prepared to be eaten. Such preparation is part of the seduction and anticipation. By our appetites being stimulated we are encouraged to enjoy both the food and the company. In this way it is possible for eating together to become an intimate sharing together.

One of the most memorable demonstrations of hospitality in the Gospels is surely that of Jesus washing his disciples' feet, which was then the first and, quite literally, most basic act of hospitality on entering a house. The guest could not sit down in comfort for a meal with hot, aching and dirty feet. (And it was not just in ancient Palestine that cleanliness was a necessary aid to digestion – a good wash or a bath before a special meal is still a common preliminary for many in this day and age and culture.) Much has been made in biblical commentaries of Jesus' foot-washing gesture as an act of humility, because he was doing the work of a slave or a servant. But maybe we need to pay more attention to foot-washing, considering the action of

the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair, and the example of Lot, bathing the angels' feet in the opening quote of this article. Not only is it a humble act of comfort and care, one which was an essential preliminary before any other ministrations could be made, but also it is specific to the symbol of *feet* rather than, say, face and hands.

Hospitality, hospital, hostel

Feet traditionally symbolize the bodily, fleshly part of ourselves. It is in this sense that feet may be understood as our base and not simply our 'baseness' or (by implication) our inferior natures. Thus, in the Gospel of John, Jesus washing the disciples' feet is very much a preliminary to, if not actually part of, the meal. Feet are sometimes a euphemism or a substituting symbol for male genitals in the Hebrew Bible, and so feet also represent something quite intimate and vulnerable about ourselves which we may or may not choose to entrust to the care of another. At this point it is worth looking a bit more closely at the etymological meaning of the word 'hospitality'.

It is no mere coincidence that the words 'hospital' and 'hostel' share the same root as hospitality (as does hospice, which will be mentioned later in this article). In medieval times, churches and holy shrines, to which houses or members of religious orders were often attached, were permanent staging posts at which pilgrims or penitents would stop to find food, shelter and nursing care for their sores and illnesses. Wounds to the feet would have been particularly common, as they still are in the case of wayfarers today. Of course there were other illnesses, but those to the feet would be the most pressing, particularly if a pilgrimage had to be completed by a certain date – say the feast day of the particular saint being venerated.

The needs of pilgrims probably have changed little if the words of a modern-day fictional pilgrim are anything to go by:

> You seem to drop out of time . . . All that matters are the *basics* [my italics]: feeding yourself, not getting dehydrated, healing your blisters, getting to the next stopping-place before it gets too hot or too cold or too wet. Surviving . . . [A]fter a while you resent the presence of other people, you would rather walk on your own, be alone with your thoughts and the pain in your feet.[3]

In such a context, hospitality is much more to do with nurture and nursing and much less to do with socializing. Under such circumstances, the best form of communication is by empathy, which is a non-

judgemental, often wordless but compassionate attitude because the carer has experienced similar sufferings and so 'suffers with' the patient – the one who waits. In this particular work of fiction the carer soon learns that the pilgrim welcomes food, companionship and a bed but vigorously resists any interference or 'help' with the actual journeying which, however painful and slow, must be done alone and on foot. The physical incarnates the spiritual – the blistered 'sole' is also the aching 'soul'; both are weighed down and both must be meditated on. It is in this sense that the traveller's feet are a symbol which actualizes the union of body and soul – sole and spirit. Similar union between the sacred and the secular was symbolized in the preparation and cooking of food in the traditional kitchen of Jewish culture, and its spirit, though not its very specific rules and regulations, was handed down to the Christian tradition. Biblical hospitality is therefore very much about intimacy – the intimate love shown by God to people and in turn by each of us to one another.

Although hospitality in gospel understanding may be about an at-one-ment, by means of divine love, between the sacred and the secular, this does not mean to say that it has always been experienced as such. Indeed the Gospels are full of allusions to the fact that money or wealth tempts us to venerate the secular at the expense of splitting it off from the sacred (see 1 Tim 6:6–10). The desire to turn unity into duality is part of our human nature, as the abuse of hospitality in the Garden of Eden story reveals.

The food of hospitality from medieval times to today

It is all too easy to look back on the past and to try and impose a unity which was not there. For example, medieval feasts, where the harvest tithes of the poor were in part returned by the feasts of the lord, were an important way of distributing food – as feasts still are in many Third World countries today[4] – but they were not without their shadow side. An erratic food supply encouraged dependence on, and hence fealty to, the wealthy. The hospitality offered was, more often than not, a display of power and status and was not therefore hospitality in the gospel understanding of the word.

The pilgrim or penitent also required food and a bed and it is from this that the word 'hostelry' comes, where, as Erasmus in 1518 observed, 'one ate what one was given when one was given it'. Inns then have been likened to the subsidized works canteen of the welfare state.[5]

Hospitality was not confined to inns or religious houses and offering food to another when food was scarce was, if done by a poor person, an

act of extreme generosity. Abundant food was a sign of wealth and of the aristocracy, so the opportunity to be gluttonous was as much prized as it was despised, for gluttony was considered a major form of lust (much like the ownership of a large, powerful petrol-guzzling car today). Right up to the eighteenth century the wealthy used feasts to display their wealth and to distinguish themselves from the lower classes.[6]

Industrialization helped bring about the regularization of the food supply and with it the greater independence of the poor – provided, of course, they had the means to pay for food. With the greater security of food supplies, the lower classes could emulate the gargantuan appetites of the upper classes. But no sooner did this begin to happen than the upper classes pronounced 'blow-outs' to be 'vulgar' and began to esteem personal qualities of self-control. From the late seventeenth century social distinction came to be expressed more through the quality of culinary skills in preparing the food. Today in the West, to be thin may be perceived as belonging to the élite of the rich and powerful, where whatever is lacking in will power may be made up for by spending time and money on expensive gymnasiums and the attentions of personal fitness experts.

But the major shift from medieval times to today concerns the development of notions about what constitutes the 'civilized self', where being civilized has come to mean exerting ever more control over the body.[7] 'Civilized', a word which once meant a courteous way of relating to other people where their needs are seen as taking priority over one's own, has, in our increasingly secularized world, come to mean 'how I wish myself to be seen'. In other words 'my needs (for pleasure and esteem) take priority over anyone else's needs'. Such a generalization may seem crude, but to be focused so acutely on one's own body is to become increasingly separate from others and sociologically signifies regression. Modern societies have been described as having an increasingly 'oral' character (which is in keeping with regression to a more infantile emotional state). Although less and less time is spent on ritual meals, there has been a corresponding rise in the consumption of 'non-ritual' items such as gum, sweets, alcohol, soft drinks, snacks and tobacco – which has been described as a sort of thumb-sucking attempt at security to fill the spiritually empty, and so unloved, spaces within.[8]

It is easy for Christians to make comparisons with the life of the early Church and to criticize such developments as 'wrong' choices, but such judgements are probably overhasty. At the time of the Early

Church people understood themselves through their group identity. Desmond Tutu is reported to have said: 'I relate, therefore I am'. Such relational understanding is common to most pre-literate, pre-industrial societies. In such communities the act of eating together creates the group identity. The individual, in the act of eating, is 'eaten into the community'. In the context of a meal we are absorbed into the community – the food eats us. Our language recognizes this assimilation, particularly in the context of drinking, for to be 'drunk' signifies that it is the wine which 'drinks us'.[9] We know this in our subconscious selves but the conscious meaning has become inverted. We have taught ourselves so well to value our outer 'civilized' selves that when alcohol allows us a temporary escape into self-indulgence and physical and emotional release, we reject the freed parts of our nature – 'I was not myself, it was the wine!'[10] But our subconscious selves know full well that we become what we eat and drink, which is why people today are so anxious about what they unconsciously may be assimilating in the foods and drinks they consume. Because the production and processing of the foods we buy is no longer under our control,

> modern, ordinary supermarket food products tend to acquire some mysterious alien quality . . . The peril we fear in food is no longer biological corruption, putrefaction, but rather chemical additives, trace elements or excessive processing.[11]

As a result, in modern society, it is now individual dictates of 'taste' which dominate. Although meals may still be shared with family and friends, their power to 'eat' (transform) the group into community is much diminished. As Fischler has put it: 'If one does not know what one is eating, one is liable to lose the certainty of what one is oneself'.[12] Eating, except when the food is perceived as trustworthy, therefore risks alienating human beings still further.

The implications for hospitality today

The implications for hospitality in contemporary society are enormous. It is now often very difficult to offer a meal without creating any expectation of a return invitation and to have the offer accepted as such. Increasing alienation, often euphemistically described as individualization, has led to a decrease in trust (so that anthropologists are not the only ones sceptical of the notion of a 'free lunch'!). Instant repaying of hospitality, in the form of a box of chocolates or equivalent 'gift' (which somehow seems to lack the spirit of gift), has become a dominant feature in accepting any offer of entertainment. We no longer

feel we can cross the threshold without payment of some kind. And the lesson today's generation of children is learning is to expect to be *paid* for gracing a party with one's presence with the bribe of an increasingly extravagant 'party bag' loaded with goodies to take home.

Although the rhythm of feasting and fasting may no longer be hallowed in the church lectionary or enforced by fluctuations in the food supply, human beings still reveal a duality in how they think about eating. Today we fluctuate between using food to display ascetic self-control and for hedonistic pleasure, but these two are not always kept separate. The consequent burden for women preparing meals has been enormous (and this is still overwhelmingly the woman's role). Women may have been liberated from heavy, manual kitchen work but they have taken on the complicated burden of trying to juggle ascetic and hedonistic tastes by providing both healthy *and* enjoyable meals for family and friends.

In extending an invitation the modern host or hostess can no longer rely on being seen as offering a part of him- or herself – a basic tenet of hospitality. Providing a meal for family and friends may be difficult enough but offering the hospitality of a meal to relative strangers, another basic tenet of gospel hospitality, is fraught with hazards. The modern hostess has to struggle with time-honoured beliefs about food, but in the modern context. For example, in British culture, a sweet course is incomplete without something liquid to pour over it.[13] But what should this dressing be – yoghurt, custard or cream? Will serving cream be seen as simply trying to compromise guests' weight or, more convolutedly, as trying to subvert the National Health Service by adding to its list of patients with coronary heart disease? And if she does that will she thereby be voting for money to be spent on heart transplants rather than care of the mentally ill? On the other hand, if she serves yoghurt will she be considered a killjoy and if she serves custard will she be considered old-fashioned, or worse, 'naff'? Does she offer sparkling mineral water in a plastic or a glass bottle? Or does she not offer mineral water, thereby avoiding the recycling dilemma, although it may be an acceptable alternative to alcohol and so help discourage drink-driving? And what about beef?[14] Does one eat beef in solidarity with stricken farmers or does one not eat beef as a protest against the neglect by politicians of the interests of consumers?

The ultraconscientious hostess also has to consider the socio-economic status of her guests if she is to provide them with foods they will like and in a manner they will find acceptable. In a study of French eating habits the *nouveaux riches* ate heavy, expensive foods; professional people chose light, delicate foods and rejected coarse, fatty

foods; less well-off middle-class people, who were inclined to ascetic rather than conspicuous consumption, preferred inexpensive, original and exotic foods; whereas the bourgeoisie were much more concerned with good manners, refinement and formality.[15]

Here is an agenda of enormous personal ethical responsibility for both individual and global morality – let alone etiquette. The dilemmas identified may seem fantastic in the context of a single dinner party, if not somewhat flippant, but they are real; such concerns are actually present, if only as an undercurrent. We may no longer tell our children to eat everything on their plates 'because of the starving millions' but we are still conscious of our global responsibilities in much more subtle and complex ways. Morality has been secularized in this way for many people. In the modern world morality has become solely our responsibility, it is no longer about choices made in the light of the law of God. Instead of being aware of the presence of God, by blessing God for what we are about to eat, we are instead only conscious of the presence of ghostly strangers at our table who may not physically share our food but who seem to be watching every mouthful we eat! The spiritual challenge remains, while the framework of faith for its support is largely lost.

What are we starved of today? What is the comfort we need?

When the ancient Israelites were urged to show the stranger hospitality they were being told to care for others as they had been cared for by God. Such hospitality springs from empathy and compassion and as such, true hospitality – providing that which offers real comfort and nurture – springs from an awareness of what brings healing to our own sorrowful experience of alienation and estrangedness. And in this age the alien, the stranger, is not always someone we have never met before. They are, as often as not, ourselves or someone close to us. We often say of someone 'she is not herself', 'he has become a stranger to himself and others'. Each one of us at some time or another needs the hospitality by which we are 'eaten into community'. Unfortunately, however, being 'eaten into community' no longer 'happens' simply by sharing food with others round the same table. The food we eat is lacking a vital nutrient.

Today the vast majority of us are suffering not vitamin but spiritual deficiency, characterized by the sense of a loss of (inner) meaning; a surfeit of material symbols but a disconnection with symbols which connect with the sacred; and a profound sense of incompleteness, fragmentation and yearning for wholeness (but with little idea what

that actually means). One obvious response for the churches is to try and make up for today's 'deficiency disease' by concentrating on giving people 'spiritual food'. Maybe this is one reason why, in recent years, the eucharist has been so easily accepted as the central focus of worship by so many Christians today. But as medieval anorexic nuns discovered (however much they were lauded for denying it) the body (and also the soul?) cannot survive for long on only wafers and sips of wine. We have somehow spiritualized the eucharist so much that we have lost the context of the *meal*.[16] In so doing we have lost touch with the fundamental incarnational tenet of gospel hospitality which *integrates* the needs of body and soul. But this is not simply to argue for more harvest suppers and the like, particularly if they do no more than perpetuate the duality, the splitness between food for the spirit and food for the body.

Sacrifice (*sacer* + *facere*, to make holy), in anthropological understanding,[17] is about creating a *conduit*, a passage-way between the ordinary and the divine, earth and heaven, human beings and the gods. What is sacrificed – the food offering – is the symbol which makes, actualizes, the connection between the secular and the divine. Today's symbols, through the liturgy of advertising, increasingly make connections between secular and secular powers – like that famous, world-wide symbol of Coca Cola. For, when we drink Coca Cola, do we not also, at the same time, imbibe the American dream?[18]

Somehow we have to rediscover that *conduit* to the sacred by finding the symbols which not only make the connection, but which *integrate* the sacred and the ordinary matter of the everyday. So it was with the early Christians: every time wheat was ground and bread was made, it became a meditation with the hands on the strangeness of Jesus' words about what it meant to be a grain of wheat dying to new life. The quest for so-called 'natural' foods is a contemporary manifestation of the desire to reconnect with the sacred, though in this instance the sacred is more pantheistic than Christ-centred.

But quests are pilgrimages too and they bring us back to where we began, the hospitality shown to travellers – foot-washing, food and rest. Perhaps the nearest we have to holistic care in this day and age is the hospice movement, where travellers on the journey to death are the honoured guests who, like all pilgrims, only stop a while. As pilgrims passing through, they cannot return the hospitality they are shown, but the modern hospitalers will sometimes find that in these vulnerable and needy people they are entertaining angels unawares (Heb 13:2).

NOTES

[1] J. Goody, *Cooking, cuisine and class: a study in comparative sociology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982).
[2] D. Lupton, *Food, the body and the self* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 1996), p 53.
[3] D. Lodge, *Therapy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), p 301.
[4] S. Mennell, A. Murcott and A. H. van Otterloo, *The sociology of food: eating, diet and culture* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 1982), p 61.
[5] *Ibid.*, p 82.
[6] *Ibid.*, p 49.
[7] Lupton, *Food*, p 22.
[8] P. Falk, *The consuming body* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 1994), p 29.
[9] R. A. Alves, *The poet, the prophet and the warrior* (London: SCM Press, 1990), p 14.
[10] Lupton, *Food*, p 31.
[11] Quoted in Lupton, *Food*, p 89.
[12] *Ibid.*
[13] M. Douglas and M. Nicod, 'Taking the biscuit: the structure of the British meal', *New Society* 30 (1974), pp 744–777.
[14] Scares that bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) might be transmitted to humans led to the government declaring a massive cull of beef cattle which has led to massive financial disaster for many beef farmers.
[15] Lupton, *Food*, p 96.
[16] P. Rouillard, 'From human meal to Christian eucharist' in R. Kevin Seasoltz (ed), *Living bread, saving cup* (Minnesota, 1982), pp 126–156.
[17] E. Leach, 'The logic of sacrifice' in B. Lang (ed), *Anthropological approaches to the Old Testament* (London and Philadelphia: SPCK and Fortress Press, 1985).
[18] 'When I say a bottle of *Coca Cola* I mean it metaphorically speaking, I mean it as an outward and visible sign of something inward and spiritual, I mean it as if each *Coca Cola* contained a djinn, and as if that djinn was our great American civilisation ready to spring out of each bottle and cover the whole global universe with its great wide wings. That is what I mean.' N. Mitford, *The blessing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951), p 152.