

Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time 2018

Fr Jonathan Jong

2 Kings 4.42-44

Ephesians 4.1-6

John 6.1-15

Notwithstanding her death by guillotine, Marie Antoinette is perhaps best remembered for a remark—callous or ignorant or both—about starving French peasants: *let them eat brioche*, she is alleged to have said upon hearing that they had no bread to eat. The more familiar English reception of this meme typically translates “brioche” as “cake”, but this more decadent rendering is no more historically accurate than the French original. It is also no *less* historically accurate: the Queen of France said no such thing, as far as historians can tell. It is, as we say these days, *fake news*.

The famine was real enough, though. The drought of 1788 followed by a harsh winter inflated food prices: the common people were spending up to 88% of their income on bread alone. Or they starved, which many did, out in the countryside. Such conditions are ripe for revolution, of course: the day before they won the World Cup just two weeks ago, the French celebrated Bastille Day, when in 1789, the Third Estate stormed the fortress-prison, which was the beginning of the end of the *ancien régime*.

The political stakes *seemed* much lower by the Sea of Galilee, when Jesus sat five thousand people down and—instead of telling them to have croissants and caviar—he fed them all, on five loaves and two fish, borrowed from a boy, unnamed but now immortalised. And yet, this was enough for the mob to rise up and attempt to make him king; a far cry from the chief priests' confession, later on before Pilate, that they had no king but Caesar. Yet another case of food fuelling revolution, though in a rather different way.

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Maybe food is always political, whether we notice it or not. It is, after all, what ties us together, both at the dining table and in the supply chain. Potatoes came from South America, and later, during the Great Famine, redefined Ireland and her relationship to the United Kingdom and, through immigration, the United States. The spice trade—and the European quests for India it engendered after the fall of Byzantium—had no small part in unleashing the colonial era, and thus the British Empire, including the land of my birth. We have, most if not all of us, been shaped by these historical forces.

And even if not, we have surely experienced the camaraderie and conflict of the table. Think of Christmas dinners: the remembered stories shared and love, but also the awkward conversations we have had about politics or religion, so-and-so's new

boyfriend or newfound vegetarianism. And think of the Last Supper, at which loyalties are revealed, and treacheries too. As St John tells it later on, Jesus dips bread and hands it to Judas: a sign of friendship that instead betokens enmity.

Food has always been political then, and for obvious reasons: it is, like air and water, essential to life, but also easier to control and commodify, and therefore amenable to gift and trade and restriction and taxation. The diversity of what counts as food also allows it to be a marker of social identity, from nationality and ethnicity to class and the participation in the most recent trendy intolerance. Food is also a medium of creativity, and art too is always political.

Jesus himself seems to have disapproved of the crowd deciding to forcibly enthrone him on the strength of his ability to feed them. But we too—implicated by the writers of the gospels and the putters-together of the lectionary—use this story as a way of elevating our

guy, our party. The multiplication of the loaves and fish is, in today's readings, deliberately compared to Elisha's feeding of *one hundred* with *twenty* loaves, which is of course more bread and fewer hungry stomachs. Jesus is powerful, is the insinuation: more powerful than Elisha. From here, it is not a long road, and one too often taken, to Christian supersessionism and from there, anti-semitism.

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At first reading, it seems clear that the point of this story is to establish that Jesus is powerful. After all, it is immediately preceded by a lengthy soliloquy on his authority, and immediately followed by another famous miracle, of Jesus walking on water. These are, it appears, signs in the unsophisticated sense that fantastic feats lend Jesus credibility.

But, just a little later on, Jesus himself repudiates this interpretation of things. He says, to the same crowd

that has dogged him these past days, that they seek him, *not* because they saw signs, but because they had eaten their fill. They wanted to make him king because he could pad their bellies, and that is precisely not the point of the exercise: our satiation and satisfaction is precisely not the point of the gospel. “I am the bread of life”, he says, and “the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh”. And at this revelation, St John tells us, the crowds disperse, realising that that gimmick with the tuna sandwiches was not to be a regular feature of the messianic administration.

So, it turns out that the difference between Jesus of Nazareth and the Marie Antoinette of our misattributed *mal mot* is not that Jesus feeds the poor while the First Lady makes unhelpful suggestions. It is, rather, that Jesus gives *himself* up: not just his bread, nor even his pastry chef, but himself altogether. The historical Marie Antoinette is, of course, like the historical Jesus, bound and murdered, and it might be

tempted to celebrate her as a martyr of Catholic gentility to leftist barbarism. But her death is a by-product of a revolution already long underway, whereas the death of Jesus is a making of something utterly new, the birth of a society that ultimately brings judgement upon all earthly societies and kingdoms and governments and churches.

The scandal of the cannibalistic language Jesus employs should not distract us from the truth that, actually, he means it: and he means for us to join him in the absurdity of feeding others of ourselves. It can be no coincidence that the early history of Christianity is replete with lives of service and self-sacrifice, even of martyrdom. It has been a long time since anyone has taken seriously the oft-repeated commandments to sell possessions to give to the poor, but it is in our blood so to do. Because it is in *his* blood, which we consume; in his body, of which we partake.

Food is always political, and more so, this bread of life and cup of salvation, which we call *thanksgiving* and which we call *sacrifice*: this is food, not of another regime, but of another world, which this one yearns to become; the eucharist is food, not of revolution, but of transformation, the mystery of changing the very substance of things. The logic of the eucharist—that is, the logic of Christianity—is that there is miracle in gift. We offer this stuff, which the earth has given and human hands have made, and in so mundane a sacrifice, we receive in return God, so that—against all evolutionary prerogative and economic sense—we give ourselves to others. It is inherent to Christian life then, that we feed the hungry, not just when it's convenient for us, but of our first fruits and even when it feels like we are the ones being consumed.

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How are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?

There is, it turns out, plenty of bread and fish, for the five thousand, and then some, if only there is some kid who is willing to give up his bagels and lox.

Jesus's answer is to ask a boy for his lunch, and show the world what God can do with one person's obedient generosity. I don't think that answer has changed, and neither do you.

There is currently enough food in the world to keep all the hungry fed, if only we would lead lives worthy of the calling to which we have been called. But we already know that.

It is, of course, impossible to change the world; as it is to feed a multitude on five loaves and two fish; as it is to receive the flesh and blood of God in a piece of wafer and a sip of wine. So, let's get on with it.