

So did you watch *Bake Off*? Something like a sixth of the nation saw the final of the last series, and we saved up the beginning of this one so we could watch it uninterrupted, actually while eating our own meal. We've even met the 2014 winner. You can learn a lot about people through food. The care with people plan, or don't; the skill of mixing ingredients; the way a meal expresses so much more than simply taking on the calories and nutrients you need. Eating together reveals people's preferences, their physical make up, their style. Some people treat food simply as fuel, for others it's art and culture. When you go to eat at someone's house, or they come to you, how the event is set up says a lot about you and them. The way you eat in a community says a lot too - remember school dinners?

Perhaps that is why Luke the Evangelist depicts Jesus at lots of dinners, and why he sets Jesus's teaching and ministry in that context. There are 19 meals in Luke, 13 of which are unique to his account. The whole of Luke 14 is told by Luke as if it's one meal, and the food references go on into chapter 15 as well - the prodigal son's older brother gets most annoyed at the banquet thrown by his father. This may well be Luke gathering together a number of events and stories with a common theme, but Luke likes food, and the occasions it's eaten. When Jesus ate with people, more was remembered than what they ate. When we eat together we communicate far more than what we say, and in these meal stories much is to be found about how the Kingdom of God works.

For instance, where should you sit at a big 'do'. If you've ever had to sort the seating for a wedding reception, or been annoyed at where you've been put, you'll know this problem. People jostle for the best seats, the ones near the important people. Jesus watches the way people assemble, and teaches them a lesson in humility. Rather than heading for a place near the top. Jesus told them to start at the bottom. A simple lesson about feeling better when you are promoted rather than demoted takes on a whole new meaning when we apply it to the way we act as Christians in a world obsessed with success and prestige. Our place is at the bottom, not the top. Having been given everything by God, we don't need to claim a prestigious slot in the gatherings we go to. There are greater things at stake.

Jesus goes on to test our motivations for inviting people to a meal. He challenges his hearers that if the invitation is about what it will do for you - either by gaining credit by having someone prestigious, or by using an invitation to engineer a reciprocal invitation round to their place - then you will already have had your reward. Jesus says that if you invite someone who will do your reputation no good, or who can't repay you by an invitation in return, then you will gain much greater credit in heaven. Do notice Jesus's exaggerated style here. He's not saying 'don't ever invite your friends'. He's saying that 'if you invite your friends, then how much more should you invite people you wouldn't normally expect to invite'.

Luke 14 continues with the story of those who are invited to a dinner and refuse, and the way that the host extends the invitation to the most unlikely. If we are sitting round the table with people just like us we're probably not doing our own inviting very well. It doesn't take much reflection to see this as God's call to us to answer the invitation, and to extend that invitation to others. Many have seen in this parable a challenge to Jesus's Jewish hearers, keen to 'fence their table', but at the same time unwilling to hear God's call

for themselves. The early church heard this as a call to welcome the Gentiles as well as the Jews. We can hear it is a call to ensure that we have received the love of God – we have accepted our invitation - and to extend that not just to those we think will fit, but to all, and not to give up until all have been invited in a way which makes sense to them.

There are some very practical things which are a challenge to me from all this. The church is quite good at doing non humble humility. Just look at the way processions are organised, and the way the servants of God try to ensure their place in the pecking order. Just look at the kind of people who find it easy to come to church, and then ask yourself why others may find it difficult. If your restaurant is attracting fewer people, it may be time to redecorate, review the menu, look at the opening hours, think about the welcome. How can we reshape what we are inviting people to, and check that our menu is attractive? Maybe we should start offering take aways. Now what would that mean for the church?

There is also much that is practical here about the way we make actual food available to those who have little. And we should ask whether, if Jesus spent so much time eating with others, how can we eat with others more and welcome others to that table? When did you last have others round? It doesn't need to be *Bake Off* or *Masterchef*. Just eating anything with others draws us close to them. Having a drink and some crisps, doing a Barbeque, asking people to bring different wines and tasting them together, staying for breakfast after the 8.00 Communion, and inviting others to come. These are acts of mission and love. Try it.

There is so much here that is challenging here about the way we welcome and invite, to ensure that we are not just replicating ourselves, but genuinely making the love of God open to all. There is a challenge to ensure that we get out there and make the invitation plain. As I said recently in the Magazine, there is very little which really requires you to get out there and invite people – except you wanting to do it. Most people generally hope that someone else will do that kind of thing. And there is a clear call to be humble, to get over ourselves, and genuinely to seek the lowest place and offer the higher places to others. So why not invite someone for some food? They can only say no thanks.

How we eat together speaks of how we live together, and relate to each other. If the food is good here, and the atmosphere is genuinely enriching, what's stopping you inviting others to enjoy it? They can only say no. Pray that they don't – for this is the bread of life.