
Food is Politics

Luke 24.13-35

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 6, 2008 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

We are what we eat. These five words explain why there is nothing more fundamental to human life than food.

What I want to do today is to say four things. First, food is politics. Food is at the heart of our common life. Then I want to suggest it was always so. Only once we have seen it was always so can we understand why when Jesus transformed human existence from the inside out he did it by transforming food. And when we have seen how Jesus transformed food we can see what it might mean to envisage and embody a Christian politics based on food.

When I say the word politics I don't mean specifically primaries, caucuses and elections. I mean the whole ordering of the things people hold in common. I mean the way human beings come to terms with the fact that we don't get to choose whom we share the planet with. I mean what really makes societies tick.

Food is politics. The food industry is the largest manufacturing industry in this country. Anyone who disputes the description of agriculture and animal farming as an industry hasn't been outside lately. The reality is, the old distinction between food on the one hand, which was about the country and the soil, and industry on the other, which was about the city and the factory, has broken down. We all go to the supermarket and shop for groceries. But did you know that the average item of food in a grocery store has travelled 1500 miles? This means that putting food on our dinner plates is a global project. Let me give two examples, one of meat, the other of bread.

The first example concerns soybeans. Our national economy has an enormous appetite for meat and isn't too fussy if the animals that yield the meat are intensively reared in unpleasant and sometimes hideous conditions. What are those animals going to eat? Increasingly the answer is soybeans. Where are these soybeans going to be grown? On the whole, Brazil. How do Brazilian farmers have enough land to grow this new crop? By ripping out the rainforest, is the answer, and jeopardizing the ecology of the whole planet in the process. Is the tropical soil suitable for soy farming? As it happens, no, it isn't, and after a few years the land is exhausted and more forest needs ripping out leaving a desert behind. And who funds all this so-called development? Turns out 60% of it is underwritten by three agricultural corporations based in this country. This is the politics of food.

The second example concerns bread. Once a seed is sown, it is aided by fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides. Only strenuous procedures prevent these fossil-fuel derivatives poisoning the water supply. After the combine harvester and truck transfers the grain to a silo, it's sprayed with fungicide and stored for months or years. Eventually it reaches a large flourmill to be refined and treated and then on to a bread factory where a conveyor belt mixes flour, yeast and water. Then it's mechanically sliced, slotted in a plastic bag and trucked to a supermarket, where consumers, having been persuaded by advertising that bread is the truly natural option, drive to purchase it in cars, but in fact leave so much unsold by the best before date that much of it is discarded and trucks come and take it away. Thus bread production is one long fossil-fuel consumption exercise from beginning to end. This is the economy of food.

Food is politics. And that's before we recall that 40% our country's population struggles with obesity, while on a college campus like Duke perhaps one in four women are struggling with an eating disorder, along with an increasing number of men. Food is domestic politics just as much as it's global politics.

And of course it's always been so. This is my second point. The world of the gospels is as highly charged politically as any congressional select committee or local anti-immigration caucus. The outer reaches of Tiberius' Roman Empire had one central purpose in the imperial economy: and that was to be a breadbasket and source of other agricultural surpluses. If you lived in an Italian villa and your taste was fish paste, olive oil or wine, then Galilee was your key supply base. Perhaps the most significant Old Testament practice in this regard was the Sabbath. The soil of the Holy Land was perpetually at risk from eroding or becoming too salty. The constant imperial demands for food and the extensive taxation system both feature in the gospels. Consider for a moment in the story of Legion and the Gadarene swine why pigs were being reared in a Jewish

country, where no one was eating pork, except to satisfy Roman needs; and consider why tax collectors were regarded as traitors. In these conditions a bad harvest could force a smallholder off the land and the temptation to ignore the Sabbath day and the Sabbath of fallow year was immense. Consider also the kinds of diseases carried by those drawn to Jesus. You'll find that most of them are connected in some way to malnutrition. The politics of food dominates the gospels just as much as it dominates today's global economy. This is my third point. When Jesus set about transforming human reality, he went to the core of the culture: the production and consumption of food.

The gospels are an account of the story teller who becomes the story, the healer who becomes the one in whose body the world is healed, the messenger who becomes the message. Jesus' new politics addresses the politics of food in two principal ways – through speech and through embodiment.

Most of Jesus' talking about food comes in his parables. It's often supposed that Jesus was a simple agrarian figure telling homespun yet subversive stories of small-town folk, a kind of cross between Huckleberry Finn and John Denver. But when your eyes are opened to the politics of food the parables take on a new dimension. When we read the story of the landowner who built bigger and bigger barns, we start to ask, "Whose land had now come into his possession and why? Was he in the Romans' pocket or simply exploiting his fellow Jews?" In other words it's no longer just a parable about greed but also a story about the politics of food. Think again about the parable of the sower. The stony ground and the thistles aren't just figures of speech. They're agronomic reasons why peasant farmers remained in grinding poverty. And when the good soil produced a hundredfold, this isn't just some kind of middle-eastern penchant for exaggeration. This is saying at last this struggling peasant farmer could pay his taxes, pay his debts and finally buy his own land and be free of bonded oppression for good. This becomes Jesus' image of salvation, of the kingdom of God – the ability to have more than enough food in a culture of extortion and exploitation.

But Jesus doesn't just talk the talk, he walks the walk. He embodies his new kingdom politics of food in the way he eats. Remember we are what we eat. Jesus is how Jesus *eats*. Luke's gospel, from which we read today, gives us an account of seven definitive meals Jesus ate on his journey to the cross. The first is a banquet with Levi the tax collector. Then a sinful woman washes Jesus' feet with her tears at the house of Simon the Pharisee. Already Jesus' way of eating food has incorporated social and personal sin. Then at the feeding of the five thousand Jesus becomes a new Moses offering Israel God's manna in the wilderness. Next at a Pharisee's house Jesus transforms the notion of outer purity, and then on his way to another Pharisee's house Jesus transforms the notion of Sabbath by healing a man with dropsy. You have to understand the Pharisees wrote the book on how to eat. By challenging the way the Pharisees' ate, Jesus was starting a revolution. And then Jesus goes back to a tax collector's house, by the name of Zacchaeus, and at the meal Zacchaeus embarks on a radical program of welfare and restoration. That's six meals.

Remember the number seven is the perfect number in this tradition. The seventh meal is the Last Supper. At the Last Supper the story teller becomes the story. The Passover deliverance is embodied in Jesus' coming death and resurrection. The transformation depicted in the parables is absorbed into Jesus' body. The teaching becomes a practice to be repeated by the disciples ever after. The meal becomes a parable. And another dimension of food is meanwhile added. In addition to food as parable, and food as the embodiment of what Jesus is, we see food as sacrifice. The whole Old Testament tradition going back to Noah linked the sacrifice of an animal with atonement for sin and thanksgiving for abundant life. The sin part was dealt with in the animal's death, while the abundance part was embodied in the feasting that followed. At the Last Supper Jesus becomes the Lamb of God, whose blood atones for sin and whose body gives the world abundant life. The body of Christ becomes food, that through the way we produce and consume food – through the way we order our economy and the people with whom we eat food – we may become the body of Christ.

And there is an eighth meal. The eighth day is the first day again. Creation was on the first day. New creation is on the eighth day. The eighth day is resurrection day. The eighth meal is on the eighth day, and it takes place on the road to Emmaus. And this is what happens on the road to Emmaus. Jesus appears to a people whose heads are downcast, looking sad. Jesus teaches. Jesus says "Didn't you realize? Don't you *get* it?" Jesus receives the ridicule and misunderstanding of his followers, who say "Are you the only one in Jerusalem who has no idea what's being going on?" Feel the irony of those words, said to the only one in Jerusalem who actually does

know what's going on. And then Jesus tells a story. It's a parable of the way God saves Israel. It's a story of healing. It's a story of sacrifice. It's all the things those seven meals have been in Luke's gospel – moments of the reassembling of God's people from exile, moments of storytelling, moments of discovering the real purpose of food in God's new order. And then what happens? They eat a meal, of course. At the meal Jesus takes, blesses, breaks, and gives. And they think, "Hey – this is the whole gospel story – Jesus teaches, reveals, transforms, and finally sits down to summarize the whole story in one meal," and then as soon as they've realized what's going on, Jesus is gone, and they're left to embody the gospel for themselves. Every element of those previous seven meals is drawn together in this transforming eighth meal. Jesus has shown us the transforming politics of his kingdom, and it's all about food.

And so to my final point. We've seen how food is politics. We've seen how it was always so. We've seen how Jesus transforms us through transforming food. Now, finally, it's time to see how we might embody a Christian politics based on food. I have three suggestions.

(1) Number one, realize that there's nothing more political than what you eat. We can lament the demise of the rainforest, we can lobby our senators to address climate change, we can cry over the broken marriage between humanity and the planet. But we don't have to eat the food that emerges from this system. We don't have to eat beef from intensively reared cattle whose fodder cuts down the rainforest. We realized this recently here at the Chapel when we re-sourced our communion bread to ovens at the Divinity School Refectory next door. Let's not get into a fantasy about uncontaminated food. But let's realize that the world's economy is based on choices about agriculture. The world is what we eat.

(2) Number two, ask yourself "Who am I eating *with*?" Food is both need and pleasure. It's all of humanity in microcosm. Food is best eaten in the company of those in need and those who give you pleasure. Companions are friends you eat with. Those in need become friends, rather than simply objects of benefaction, when you eat with them. As for those you love, the balance of need and pleasure in food perfectly reflects the balance of need and pleasure in love. And when those in need and those you love come together in such a way that they get all tangled up around the meal table, we call it the kingdom of God.

(3) Number three, whenever you eat, be aware of what you're doing. You've heard me say many times that the Eucharist is a meal which depicts a new society in which we each bring different things to the table and receive back the same. But if worship is food, could it be that food is worship? Can we perceive the risen Christ not just in our Sunday bread, but in our daily bread? Could it be that *every* act of eating is a moment that discloses our own humanity transformed by God's divinity? Could we imagine how good eating might become a sacrament of reconciliation between human beings and our planet?

Think one last time about that meal on the road to Emmaus. The disciples saw Jesus' scars as he broke the bread. They remembered his story and realized it was their story. They discerned his body as it became their body. They left the table with hearts on fire. They who before had stood alone were united with the believers. They looked forward to every future meal as a moment of encounter with the risen Christ. They had become what they had eaten, the body of Christ. Seven transformations that shape the Christian politics of food. Not just at the Eucharist – at every meal. Let our prayer be that every supper be an Emmaus supper, and that our politics be the politics of transformed food.