

## Harvest Festival 2021

Every time we go shopping for food, we are engaging in the world of politics. We are choosing what to buy: where does it come from? Is it sourced locally? Has the chicken/cow/pig/lamb etc been treated humanely? And where we buy it from: does the shop or supermarket chain treat its staff well? Does it check its overseas suppliers properly? And lastly, how does all this fit in to a more global picture of economy, ecology and environment?

[Illustrations]

If in our own times shopping is freighted with political or ethical imperative, then in Jesus' time, you could add theology in – a potent and dangerous brew. So there is much about food in the New Testament, a lot of it surrounded with controversy. Just recently in St Mark's Gospel, we heard criticism of Jesus for eating with tax collectors and sinners, because who you ate with said something profound about your values, and tax collectors and sinners were definitely not the Jewish in-crowd.

The miracle of feeding the four or five thousand is not a kind of conjuring trick, but a demonstration of how God and God's Kingdom is: all are welcome and they are generously fed. Remember the equivalent in St John's Gospel, when Jesus develops his ideas that he is the bread of life, and the Jews are scandalised by an image of cannibalism.

It is around what food can be eaten that the early and important development described in Acts is centred: do Gentiles have to become Jews first and then Christians, and so abide by Jewish food laws? No in the vision shown to Peter – all food is clean.

And the central rite of Christian faith in the Eucharist, Communion, Mass is focussed on the blessing and sharing of food. The fact that it is called the Last Supper gives the heightened importance of a last meal before a death, which was both predictable and avoidable. So it's the meal rather than the washing of feet in which we participate daily or weekly.

So how does shopping and the New Testament and our liturgy fit together? I would argue that the Eucharist which we share together regularly, which we shared together only this morning, is a deeply political act. Our commitment to a communion – and note the 'comm' bit in those words underlining 'together' – puts us obviously alongside Jesus, and if so then alongside his radical agenda of inclusion. The generosity of God in God's Kingdom is open to all. God feeds us abundantly there, and woe betide us if we spiritualise these ideas so as to bypass hungry people and real food. This is political because the way we structure our society has resulted in food shortage for the most needy – some would argue by accident, others by design. By sharing Jesus' Eucharist, we are also saying that food should be shared equitably. I am a huge supporter of our Community Larder, but I also want to ask why it is needed at all? Not to ask these questions results in a Eucharist which in the words of Elizabeth Stuart becomes 'a middle-class dining club'.

So I urge us to remember the phrase of another theologian, the Romanian Ion Bria who talks of 'the liturgy after the liturgy', in other words our actions in response to the worship in which for a moment we have partaken of God's life. And we are helped in that by our third 'comm': compassion, the sharing of the suffering of others, which helps us to see those who are hungry and vulnerable, and act to make a difference in their lives.

And you thought you were simply going out to get a can of baked beans.

*Fr David*