

Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them.

(Luke 12:24)

For most of our married life I've done most of the food shopping and most of the cooking at home. Sometimes it hasn't been easy. Christopher has quite a severe peanut allergy, so I'd spend ages in the supermarket scanning the ingredients lists on the backs of jars. And he doesn't like mushrooms. Sue has become increasingly vegetarian over the years, whereas I don't really like vegetables - especially tomatoes, which give me stomach cramps. And yet, with a little give and take where we can, I've always been able to come up with something. So I might mutter and grumble sometimes, but I don't really mean it - there's always been food for the table. What more could I want?

This morning we have food for the table and we gather in thanksgiving for that. And so we should. This is the very stuff of life itself, sustaining the life that God has granted us - as vital to us as the air that fills our lungs and the water that falls from the skies. This is what God gives us to sustain our lives, as he provides food for the ravens and for all his creatures. Yes, we may use our understanding of the laws of nature to increase its abundance, but that understanding is, too, a gift from God to humanity, and the laws of nature are God's laws, written by him to create a world in which there is food enough that all may be fed - where there is food for the table.

All over the country, at this time of year, food - the produce of God's good Earth - is being brought into churches and people are lifting up their voices and thought in hymns and prayers of thanksgiving to our Father who provides enough food that all may be fed. Let me emphasise that - enough food is produced in the world that all may be fed, thanks to God's laws of nature and his gift of human intelligence. And yet there are people going hungry.

All over the country, at this time of year, food is being brought into churches in thanksgiving. It is being blessed and rededicated. Much of it will wind up in food banks - a growing phenomenon in this country. Referrals to food banks have increased by 170% in the last year alone. Since 2008 the number of people in need of food handouts has risen to 13 times what it was then. It now stands at nearly half a million people who - were it not for the generosity of others - would not have food for their table. Around the world there are people worse off, surviving on a little more than a few handfuls of rice or the local equivalent. For some, still, not even that. Thanks to the work of many good people that is changing - the leadership that churches have provided in promoting FairTrade goods and other initiatives has helped and they are right and good and proper. But that doesn't mean that we should not be vocal in challenging economic and political systems that lead to food banks and hunger. Dom Helder Camara, a Brazilian archbishop, once pithily observed, "When I feed the poor they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor they call me a Communist".

Questioning economic and political systems that result in hunger and even starvation for the poor is not "Communism", or politics of any kind. It is a manifestation of the care for others, the compassionate giving to ensure the wellbeing of others, that ought to be a mark of Christianity and one that is reflected in the fourth chapter of Acts. It is a manifestation of Christian recognition that God has found ways to ensure that there is enough food that all may be fed. It is only human greed and human economic and political failings that prevent that from happening.

And I wonder if the problem is that we have become a society with no sense of the sacred.

Everything has become a commodity - gadgets, cars, books, food, water, human beings even - to be bought or sold, or hired and fired, exchanged or bartered according to the ironclad laws of economics. I wonder, have we become a society that knows the price of everything but the value of nothing. Is it our desire to put a price on everything, and to use our economic clout - such as it is - to demand the highest price that we can command that gets in God's way; that same God who feeds the ravens and provides food for the table - enough that all may be fed?

People have value - not price. That's why there is a significance to food - a significance that we recognise today - that transcends economics and politics, which cannot be priced. Food is the very stuff of life itself, sustaining the life that God has given to you, to me, to each man woman and child on this planet - as vital as the air that fills our lungs and the water that falls from the skies. It is God's provision for his children and we should treat it as such.

And often we do. The churches have taken a lead in promoting FairTrade goods that ensure that those who produce food do not go hungry in doing so and that their communities are fed also. The churches have taken a lead in setting up schemes that get food to parts of the world where people go hungry - whether it be through drought or broken political economic systems. The churches have taken a lead in setting up and supporting food banks that mean that folk who are poor in one of the richest countries of the world need not go hungry. In doing so we have kept the spirit of the harvest - that God provides. He provides for the ravens, he provides enough food that all might be fed. He provides the food for the table.

I was going to say that we should be proud of these ways in which the churches have taken a lead in feeding people who would otherwise go hungry, but we're not supposed to be proud. Rather, I say to you, delight in it. Delight in the opportunities God has given you to provide for those who are hungry - imagine that in doing so you have invited them to your table and placed the food in front of them. How would that feel? Delight in picking up that jar of FairTrade coffee that costs that little bit more, or in buying that bag of rice that you know will help put food into the mouths of the hungry - imagine the kids of those farmers growing up healthy and strong because of the choices you make concerning food. How does that feel? Delight in the challenge of speaking up for the poor and the hungry when the world would forget them; of condemning political and economic structures that drive men and women to go without food so that their kids don't - imagine taking them by the hand and telling them that you stand beside them. How does that feel?

Delight in sharing the harvest. The God who feeds the ravens provides food enough that all may be fed. In doing your bit to make that happen you speak the love of God to those that need to hear it - to the poor and the hungry and to the rich and the well fed who keep them that way. You speak the love of God for his children. You offer God's invitation to one and all to gather as one family, to gather in love and fellowship with one another - black, white, young old, rich, poor - in the presence of the Father of us all. You pull back the chair that all may be seated where there is food for the table.

Lord we thank you for the food on our tables. May we treat it as your Son treated it when he took the bread, gave thanks for it, then shared it.