

Trinity 11 [Proper 17 (C)]

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on 1 September 2019.

Readings: Ecclesiasticus 10 vv 12-18 and Luke 14 vv 1 & 7-14

In the book Ecclesiastes, we find this remarkable verse: 'There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God.'

Today's gospel reading is one of many occasions recorded in the gospels when Jesus is at a meal. The excess of gluttony may be a sin, but there is something remarkable about the experience of eating and drinking, and the effect that it can have on those who have gathered around a table.

This is depicted powerfully in a remarkable Danish film, *Babette's Feast*. Whether you have seen it or not (and this is one of those occasions when I regret that we do not have the facility to show film clips in church), I unashamedly draw on the synopsis from Wikipedia¹.

Elderly and pious Protestant sisters, Martine and Philippa, live in a small village on the remote western coast of Jutland in 19th century Denmark. Their father was a pastor who founded his own rather austere church that had a particular focus on individual holiness. With their father now dead and the sect attracting no new converts, the aging sisters preside over a dwindling congregation of elderly believers.

The story flashes back forty nine years, showing the sisters in their youth. The beautiful girls have many suitors, but their father rejects them all, and indeed derides marriage. Each daughter is courted by an impassioned suitor visiting Jutland – Martine, by a charming young Swedish cavalry officer, Lorens Löwenhielm; and Philippa, by a star baritone from the Paris Opera, Achille Papin. But both sisters decide to stay with their father and spurn any life away from Jutland.

Thirty-five years later, Babette Hersant appears at their door. She carries only a letter from Papin, explaining that she is a refugee from counter-revolutionary bloodshed in Paris and recommending her as a housekeeper. The sisters cannot afford to take Babette in, but she offers to work for free. Babette serves as their cook for the next fourteen years, producing an improved version of the bland meals typical of the abstemious nature of the congregation and slowly gaining their respect. Her only link to her former life is a lottery ticket that a friend in Paris renews for her every year. One day, she wins the lottery of 10,000 francs. Instead of using the money to return to Paris and her lost lifestyle, she decides to spend it preparing a delicious dinner for the sisters and their small congregation on the occasion of the founding pastor's hundredth birthday. More than just a feast, the meal is an outpouring of Babette's appreciation, an act of self-sacrifice. Babette tells no one that she is spending her entire winnings on the meal.

The sisters accept both Babette's meal and her offer to pay for the creation of a "real French dinner". Babette arranges for her nephew to go to Paris and gather the supplies for the feast. The ingredients are plentiful, sumptuous, and exotic, and their arrival causes much discussion among the villagers. As the various never-before-seen

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babette%27s_Feast accessed 30 August and amended slightly

ingredients arrive and preparations commence, the sisters begin to worry that the meal will become a sin of sensual luxury, if not some form of devilry. In a hasty conference, the sisters and the congregation agree to eat the meal, but to forgo speaking of any pleasure in it and to make no mention of the food during the dinner.

Martine's former suitor, Lorens, now a famous general married to a member of the Danish Court, comes as the guest of his aunt, the local lady of the manor and a member of the old pastor's congregation. He is unaware of the other guests' austere plans and as a man of the world and former attaché in Paris, he is the only person at the table qualified to comment on the meal. He regales the guests with abundant information about the extraordinary food and drink, comparing it to a meal he enjoyed years earlier at the famous Café Anglais in Paris. Although the other guests refuse to comment on the earthly pleasures of their meal, Babette's gifts break down their distrust and superstitions, elevating them physically and spiritually. Old wrongs are forgotten, ancient loves are rekindled and a mystical redemption of the human spirit settles over the table.

The sisters assume that Babette will now return to Paris. However, when she tells them that all of her money is gone and that she is not going anywhere, the sisters are aghast. Babette then reveals that she was formerly the head chef of the Café Anglais and tells them that dinner for twelve people there has a price of 10,000 francs. Martine tearfully says, "Now you will be poor the rest of your life", to which Babette replies, "An artist is never poor." Philippa then says: "But this is not the end, Babette. In paradise you will be the great artist God meant you to be" and then embraces her with tears in her eyes saying: "Oh, how you will enchant the angels!", which is precisely how the story ends.

Generosity and hospitality are life affirming, as is the joy of good food, carefully prepared and served. And that is where the dinner in the house of the leading Pharisee went so badly wrong.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus sees meals as foretastes of the heavenly banquet and as signs of God's kingdom, especially when each has a place at the table and each person present can enjoy the company of the other guests and the food and the drink. This is the experience at Babette's dinner party. There need be no other agenda; although sometimes there will be one, such as when Jesus shares the Last Supper with his disciples.

On this occasion, as we have heard in the gospel reading, Jesus has accepted an invitation from one of the leading Pharisees to the Sabbath day meal. It was an occasion when everyone was alert, both to what Jesus would say and do and to the rest of the company. One suspects that there was 'an atmosphere'.

The meal is exclusive rather than inclusive, and even in this exclusive company, there is unhealthy concern for status. Jesus makes it clear that he has noticed the jostling for the best places, and that he has no time for such games. Jesus makes it clear that a meal works best when those present are filled sheer joy at being present and anticipation of good food and drink. When the host works hard to ensure that all are welcome and take pleasure in each other's company, a meal becomes a feast – and thus, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet.

As in the meal, so in life. Those who fuss about status and seek to exalt themselves will miss out on the true shared beauty of the kingdom. To quote the priest and poet Mark Oakley, 'Heaven draws nearer when humility makes place for everyone.'