

What shall we eat?

Jesus' parable judges the rich farmer for storing his harvest for his sole use – thereby not being *rich towards God*. There is a strong strand in the Jewish law that harvest is for no one's sole benefit: offerings were made to the Lord; and the harvest festivals (Pentecost, tabernacles) were celebrations for everybody. The law provided that the gleanings of the crop should be left for the benefit of those without the means or land to sustain themselves. When Jesus' disciples picked ears of grain on their walk through the cornfield, they were criticised not for crop theft, but for violation of the sabbath.

In our communal celebrations we might be forgiven for thinking that there is rather less to be thankful for this year. The excessively hot and dry conditions which began in June have stunted crops and reduced yields. Maybe there will be some shortages; but the effect for most of us will be increased prices. Where domestic production falls short, we in the UK can afford look to the rest of the world to make up the difference.

And we can be thankful to God that the world produces enough to feed its population twice over. Agricultural advances over the centuries (plant breeding, artificial fertilisers and technology) mean that enough is grown for everyone to have enough. That not everybody does around the world – that we still hear of malnutrition and the need for emergency food supplies – has more to do with inequality than overpopulation. There is inequality at home, too, of course: when food prices rise it is those with least who suffer most.

The cost of food production isn't only measured in the price we pay for it. We've been very aware this year that crops need water: water which, in a disrupted climate, can be in short supply and for which there are competing demands from people, industry and wildlife. Crops need land on which to grow: there are competing demands for that as well. In the UK we need more low-carbon energy: solar farms and biofuels need land. We require land for increased forestry, to take up some of the carbon we continue to release (from our gas and oil boilers and our petrol and diesel cars). Land is needed for housing and development; and for our depleted wildlife. Having drained most of our fens and ploughed most of our accessible grassland, we can't increase our supply of cropland. But that's not true in other parts of the world: if you need more land, you clear another area of forest – thereby releasing the carbon it's been storing up over centuries.

Just because that's overseas doesn't mean we are innocent. Annual UK imports of soy require an area of land the size of Wales to grow them. Why do we import that much? Surely there aren't that many UK vegetarians? Yes there are; but most of them aren't human. The main reason we import soy is to feed to livestock, from chickens to cattle. And in food production terms, that's a very inefficient thing to do, both in terms of land required and the value of the food we get out compared with the food we have to put in. I'm grateful to Diana for giving me the book from which most of my statistics are drawn. $\frac{3}{4}$ of the world's farmland is used to grow food for livestock; but we only get 18% of our calories and 37% of our protein from meat and dairy. The calories we get from beef are only 3% of the calories fed to the animal over its life (for chicken its 13% - not a great return).

Food production also tends to emit carbon; is a source of pollution in rivers (typically run-off from fertilizer, whether manure or artificial) and nutrient enrichment via the atmosphere, particularly in the vicinity of intensive livestock units. Unless a food product has been air-freighted (short shelf-life foodstuffs from overseas) data analyst and author Hannah Ritchie says we should forget about food-miles: the environmental impact of food lies in its production, not its transportation. It's what we eat, not how far it's come, which matters.

None of this is to say that food is bad. We need food; we enjoy food. But it does imply a certain responsibility. While the world produces enough for all its inhabitants to have enough to live on, it can't sustain the western diet. The larger barns we require to supply the food we desire are too big.

The Church of England's recent *theological response to the environmental crises* pertinently echoes the question of the repentant members of the crowd on the Day of Pentecost: *What should we do?* It's easy to feel powerless in the face of global complexity and practices deeply embedded in our culture. But when it comes to food, there are changes most of us are in a position to make, and which, as more people make them, are making a positive difference. Because most of us already exercise a degree of choice in deciding what we are going to eat. We devote attention to selecting from a menu or choosing what to pick from the supermarket.

So this harvest I'm reflecting on some of Hannah Richies' key recommendations relating to diet:-

- Eat less meat, especially beef and lamb: these meats have the highest environmental costs in terms of emissions and demand for land and water.
- Eat less dairy, substituting plant-based alternatives: dairy contributes ¼ of the carbon footprint of the typical EU diet.
- Waste less food. Very little goes in our food waste bin: I imagine the same is true for most of you. But it seems I should stop railing against some plastic packaging, because it reduces waste from transportation damage. And not reject food because it's blemished or near it's sell-by date. Hmm...

Several years ago I decided to have two main meals each week meat free; and fish on a third. It takes a little more effort, but I enjoy vegetarian dishes – and I've discovered, it was a good move for the planet, as well as my health. But minced beef is still one of our household staples and I'm very tied to milk and yoghurt. Food for thought!

Our present crises weren't really issues in biblical times. I selected the reading from 1 Corinthians because it shows Christians paying attention to the implications of what they chose to eat. Then the issue was meat offered to false deities. Making judgements about what people ate was a divisive and sensitive subject – as it is today! Some held that Christians should avoid potentially polluted fare. Paul is not one of them: he's in the camp that believes that if you've given thanks to God, you need have no further scruples. He appears irked that his *liberty should be subject to the judgement someone else's conscience*. We might think of debate between vegans and meat-eaters today. Yet however much Paul prized Christian liberty, he urged that it needs to be exercised it with consideration for others: if it was made explicit that meat has been offered to an idol, he didn't want to undermine the faith of fellow-believers, or bring his faith into disrepute among his pagan hosts.

Similarly, we need to take account of what we can learn about the food we eat; and make our own decision on the basis not just of our own desires, but of its impact on others – including its impact on the planet we share, the demand for land around the world, the reality of climate breakdown, and how the harvests of the world are distributed.

The rich farmer was criticised for thinking only of himself and not being rich towards God. In the light of the current environmental crises, eating *for the glory of God*, as Paul puts it, is not just a matter of saying grace.