

**Sermon: Rev Susanna Pain
Sunday 29 August 2010**

READING

Luke 14:1,7-14

Sara Miles begins the prologue to her book *Take this bread* like this:

One early, cloudy morning when I was forty-six, I walked into a church, ate a piece of bread took a sip of wine. A routine Sunday activity for millions (of Americans) — except that until that moment I'd led a thoroughly secular life, at best indifferent to religion, more often appalled by its fundamentalist crusades. This was my first communion. It changed everything.

She continues:

Eating Jesus, as I did that day to my great astonishment, led me against all my expectations to a faith I'd scorned and work I'd never imagined. The mysterious sacrament turned out to be not a symbolic wafer at all but actual food — indeed, the bread of life.

In that shocking moment of communion, filled with a deep desire to reach for and become part of a body I realised that what I'd been doing with my life all along was what I was meant to do: feed people.

And she did. She started a food pantry and gave away literally tons of fruit and vegetables around the same altar where she first received the body of Christ.

At St James, King Street in Sydney, in the crypt on a Sunday afternoon, a motley crew of the city's homeless and needy comes to have a meal and hang around. We shared soup, sandwiches and fruit.

One Sunday, Nikolai had left a large saucepan of delicious pumpkin and chestnut soup, made to a French recipe, in the back of the fridge in the crypt, ready for a three-course fund raising dinner that evening that he was catering for.

When we arrived mid-afternoon to set up for the evening, one of the lunchtime guests was leaving. He extolled the virtues of the soup he'd had for lunch. It was fabulous, so delicious, it must have come from a restaurant!

Nikolai's face fell. Oh dear, the soup he'd slaved over for days was gone. But then (eventually) he smiled, and vowed every year to cook for the lunchtime crowd at the Sister Freda Mission the most delicious meal he could!

Our evening diners went without soup — but not without a good story and a salutary lesson!

On the news this week it seems there have been two recurring themes, relevant to today's gospel.

The first is, who will form our next federal government? Who will the independents work with to form stable government? Can it work? There is much speculation and discussion. There has also been some dreaming about a mixed party cabinet, and conjecture about whether a hung parliament is better or worse for democracy.

The second news item relates to the continuing floods in Pakistan and the need for aid.

Both these items speak to our gospel... I think.

Jesus is at a dinner party — and after this one, I wonder whether he will ever be invited again!

First he tells a parable in which he criticises the guests, then he insults the host. Not really the life of the party — from this glimpse at least and it makes me uncomfortable too.

Which political party is best for our country now?

Both are courting the independents ... 'Come up higher' they invite ... I haven't seen a lot of humility — but some wisdom and reflection.

What is most important surely, is good governance for the common good rather than who sits at the head of the table?

But Jesus first parable is not a piece of worldly wisdom, about how to behave at a dinner party, how to act in the world. It is about our relationship with God. God, in the person of Jesus, is inviting all people to the feast. The only way to respond to this invitation is to let go of any claim of our own merit or deserving. The people in the story, the Pharisees, were good upright churchgoers who expected the best seats because they did everything right and kept the law, (but like the outcast in the passage before this) they have to learn that salvation (wholeness) completeness is a gift — unconditional. All are invited. (Fuller)

And the second news item — floods in Pakistan and urgent need for aid.

As I drove home from Kincumber on Friday morning, I listened to the ABC's appeal for aid. I listened to the stories — the woman whose two small children had died of malnutrition and dehydration; the little boy stranded on an island...

Finally after all this time I gave some money to assist — not when I first heard...

Jesus way is to invite all to the feast. It is an open table, and giving money is one small part of including those in dire straits, who can never repay.

So there is discomfort in this reading, but the overriding message is one of challenge and acceptance.

At God's table, all are welcome. Jesus shows that again and again.

Welcome not for what we do — no way, or how good we are, but welcome.

We are invited because we are loved. God can do none other than love us...

'Can a mother forget her child?' we read. 'Yet even if she does I will never forget you, never give you up', says God.

We are loved. We belong to God, we are accepted, and we prayed earlier:

'O God you invite all to take their place at your feast.

Teach us always to honour the presence of Christ in the poor and the outcast, so that we may learn to recognise each other as brother or sister gathered around the table. Amen.'

(The invitation for us is to accept and welcome others.)

Sara Miles, in her book, continues:

It may seem crazy, at this point in history, to assert that any religion — much less Christianity, the religion of our contemporary empire, of the powerful and intolerant — can be a force for connection, for healing, for love. It may seem deluded to assert that people can still be fed with this ordinary yet mystical bread, so besmirched and exhausted and poisoned by centuries of religious practice, in ways that will change our own real lives, not to mention the world, for the better.

But this is my belief, that, at the heart of Christianity is a power that continues to speak to and transform us. As I found to my surprise and alarm, it could speak even to me: not in the sappy, Jesus-and-cookies tone of mild-mannered liberal Christianity, or the blustering, blaming hellfire of the religious right. What I heard, and continue to hear, is a voice that can crack religious and political convictions open, that advocates for the least qualified, least official, least likely; that upsets the established order and makes a joke of certainty. It proclaims against reason that the hungry will be fed, that those cast down will be raised up and that all things, including my own failures, are being made new.

It offers food without exception to the worthy and unworthy, the screwed-up and pious, and then commands everyone to do the same.

It doesn't promise to salve or erase suffering, but to transform it, pledging that by loving one another, even through pain, we will find more life. And it insists that by opening ourselves to strangers, the despised or frightened or unintelligible other, we will see more and more of the holy.

Since, without exception, all people are one body: God's. ... Faith, for me, isn't an argument, a catechism, a philosophical "proof". It is instead a lens, a way of experiencing life, and a willingness to act. As the Bible says: "Taste and see".

(Take this bread, p. xiii-xviii)

These who come to be confirmed, Jeremy, Patricia, Nicole, Rebecca, Maddison, Andrea, Gina, acknowledge that this is the one they follow. They have tasted and seen, and believe in the one who invites them and us to the feast, that is life. The one who releases all, over the parts of ourselves we dislike, or hide, over the people we avoid, and the one who loves us, invites us to share that love — with God's help.

It is as easy and difficult as that. God invites us all — to taste and see.