

The Fast Food Generation: Fattening the Five Thousand

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Tesco. Big Mac. Chips. Pizza. Coke. In our 'quick-fix', 'one-click' consumer culture, we want things fast and we want things cheap. Whether it's clothing, travel, food, information, whatever, most of us buy into this idea that we are somehow entitled to get things on the spot, and at a fraction of the true¹ cost.

As I wandered round a Christian festival this summer and watched 20-30yr olds crowding round food-stalls, guzzling factory-farmed burgers from polystyrene packaging, I couldn't help but wonder, are our consumer choices reflecting our claims to worship a Creator God who loves and cares for all He has made? Could it be that our obsession with express, low-priced goods, epitomised in our 'fast food' culture, actually conflict with key gospel values?

Let's look at John 6:5-12 - the Feeding of the Five Thousand. In this passage, Jesus invited everyone to sit down and 'distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted... when they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted".' Our Lord made sure everyone had enough to eat and then he made sure nothing was wasted. What a contrast to the way our food system works!

In our global agricultural context, food portions are increasingly unequal and vast amounts of good food are carelessly and continually wasted. We currently seem to operate in a kind of bi-polar mindset where on the one hand we are desperately worried about our capacity to feed the growing world population'² and on the other hand, 'developed' nations are over-consuming to such an extent that we are now facing an obesity epidemic. The former concern encourages us to push farmland and farm animals to breaking point, maximising 'efficiency' by applying enormous amounts of chemical fertilisers to the soil, polluting rivers and ground water and destroying topsoil, in addition to adopting sacrilegious factory-farming methods to provide cheap meat for the masses. On the other side of the coin, whilst many argue that these destructive agribusiness methods are necessary to 'feed the world', we now have more obese people than starving and endless amounts of this cheap food is wasted every day.³ It just doesn't add up. Clearly, we have a serious food distribution problem that is undermining our call to care for each other and care for creation.

As the biblical scholar, Dr Ellen Davis, says: "Almost all Israelites were farmers, and almost all of us are not, at least in the fully industrialised West. But all of us eat, and shockingly, that is probably the single most destructive thing we do on a daily basis. For we are enmeshed in a catastrophic food production system."⁴ So how can we change our consumption habits so that we are glorifying God in the way that we eat?

One of the main things we can do is to start becoming more aware of the relationships that exist around food. The Eucharist, the central Christian sacrament, celebrates relationship: relationship between us and God, relationship between us and each other and relationship between us and the whole created order. However, often these relationships and the impacts of our consumer choices are difficult to see, because our globalised economy thrives on long production lines of detached, faceless networks. Most of us have no awareness of the relationships involved in the food we eat, how the crops and animals we eat were farmed. If we are to be concerned with loving our neighbour and caring for all God has made however, the way in which workers are treated, the way in which animals are farmed and the way in which natural resources are used matters deeply.

In addition to constantly asking questions and becoming more aware of the relationships surrounding our food in a general sense, the LOAF principles are also a good practical place to start. LOAF stands for: Local, Organic, Animal-Friendly and Fair-Trade. These guidelines can be very useful and help us not to get overwhelmed by the magnitude of the issues. Ultimately, food is a gift from God and a way of celebrating His goodness together, so rather than fattening ourselves up and letting our brothers and sisters go hungry, let's challenge our unjust agribusiness system that degrades God's creation! Let's pursue kingdom values in our eating habits, making sure there is enough for everyone and that nothing is wasted. In nature everything gets used and recycled and if we are to glorify God in how we eat, we need to look to the Creator Himself. As Archbishop Rowan Williams said in his 2007 New Year message, "God doesn't do waste".⁵

ENDNOTES

- 1 By 'true' I mean a cost that takes into account non-monetary factors like social and environmental costs.
- 2 The world population is expected to top seven billion during 2011.
- 3 For example, in Britain over 30% of all food we buy gets thrown away and that's not including the odd looking carrots that get ditched before they meet the supermarket, or the stale bread thrown out by supermarkets. Indeed, if we include the food supermarkets reject too Britain is throwing away half of all the food grown on farms. Lord Haskins, former head of Northern Foods, Independent on Sunday, 2nd March 2008.
- 4 Ellen F. Davis, "A Living Creature: A Biblical Perspective on Land Care and Use", The Bible in TransMission, August 2010, p.3.
- 5 www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1374

Pip Campbell-Clause studied at Edinburgh University and Kings College London focusing on Theology and Environmental Ethics. Over the past few years, Pip has been working with A Rocha UK as Arts and Campaigns Coordinator, speaking to young people about creation care and putting on arts events to encourage environmental awareness. Pip and her husband Will are now embarking on a bit of an adventure (leaving late October 2011), travelling from London to Vancouver by land and sea, where they plan to live and work for a year or two.

