

Sunday 02 May 2010. 6.30pm Communion – the Lord’s Supper.

Reflection: Sweet and sour at the Table. James 3(TEV p291)

(James’s epistle: written to the 12 scattered tribes – throughout the nations. Traditionally thought to have been written by the Lord’s brother but others think may be an unknown James in the time around 70 – 120 AD)

Let us look at James 3: People who sit around the same table should be able to speak sweet words to one another and not sour or bitter words. The “wisdom that comes from above” tells us this. James 3 is a chapter as we know about how difficult it is to tame the tongue – how much damage the tongue can cause. (Something perhaps a certain politician might agree with this week).

Read vv 7 – 12.

In this chapter James speaks about how sweet (Glukus - glucose) water comes from a sweet well (vv11,12) – the AV calls it fresh water and how bitter/ sour or brackish water comes from a bitter (Pikros - pikric) well.

As we eat/ fellowship together whatever is in our cup (our inner life & character) will overflow – sweet water from a sweet cup and bitter water from a bitter cup. Sweet and sour/ bitter are being used metaphorically – “bitter” is used in the NT to refer to jealousy or bitter envy (v14). (Other refs: Col3:19; Rev 10:19; 8:11; 10;10)(Jesus himself used the idea of how a person’s true identity is shown when like tree the fruit reveals the real nature of itself: see *Matthew 7: 15 – 23*)

Jesus’ instituted the New Covenant meal – that we call the Lord’s Supper.

While eating the Passover meal with his Disciples shortly before his arrest and crucifixion he ordained that it was in the middle of a meal, using bread and wine that we should remember him. We know that following his resurrection his Disciples *recognised him by the way he broke bread.*

As I said at our evening communion in April it is telling how many times even following his resurrection (let alone before) that Jesus placed the table at the centre of his encounters with his Disciples. Even though the table would have been a lot closer to the ground and the Disciples and the Disciples would have sat on the ground to eat it was still a table they sat around and food that they shared. (There’s a great moment in the film *The Passion of the Christ* where Jesus the carpenter is finishing off a table with long legs (like ours) that people will need chairs to sit at and someone (Mary I think) says basically - it will never catch on.

The table and remembering Jesus and encountering him there in the midst of our fellowship with one another is our central act of worship.

The table and eating together even without a table is at the centre of so much human encounter. One of the reasons I think Breakfast Club was such a success and built such good relationships with children was because eating breakfast together was the first and central thing we did.

In the very first book of the Bible - *Genesis* we find God providing a variety of trees with fruit that men and women were to enjoy eating together – they are in fellowship

with God and one another and *they can eat the fruit of every tree of the garden except just one (the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Gen 2: 16,17).*

Eating with others and forging alliances and making covenants is spoken of throughout history and certainly in the pages of the Bible's history.

Sadly though it is sometimes in the middle of a meal that the most profound of relationships is broken. So it was *on the night that he was betrayed that Jesus took bread with his Disciples and broke it. (1C11:23).* It was the one who *dipped his bread in the sauce cup/ gravy boat* with Jesus who betrayed him. Judas betrayed Jesus maybe because he was disappointed that Jesus was not the sort of Messiah he wanted, maybe because he begrudged that Jesus kept giving away money from the common purse or maybe because he was so jealous of the other Disciples just as the Pharisees were jealous of Jesus' popularity? At the meal, the last supper Jesus spoke of having to drink a *bitter cup to the last dregs* – it was not sweet and pleasant to drink – it was a “poisoned chalice” – a cup of death. His friends were not ready to drink it with him.

Food eaten with others can be sweet and the meal table a great place of friendship and building long term relationships but it can just as easily be a sour or bitter experience.

I don't have tonnes of DVD's but I was interested to see 3 nearest the top of my favourites list were about eating with other people and the sweet and sour or bitter sweet experience of those encounters. The three films are:

- *Babette's Feast* – by Gabriel Axel based on a novel by Isak Dinesen
- *Chocolat* – based on the novel by Joanne Harris
- *Mid August Lunch* – directed and starred in by Gianni Di Gregorio.

I'm really surprised that as someone who tends to hate sub-titled films they are all subtitled. For me it goes to show that the “table” and eating together are events so universally human that we understand all the visual symbols and the whole experience and need few words to set the scene.

Babette's Feast is based in the rugged coast land of Denmark – Jutland. It tells the tale of the 2 beautiful daughters of a Lutheran Minister. Once their community and table fellowship was alive and vibrant but through the years following the founder's death the 2 daughters are left to lead a group of ageing miseries who have lost their joy and laughter. It is the arrival of a French chef called Babette who has worked in a rather dubious French Restaurant/Salon who comes amongst them and in response to the welcome and love of the sisters decides to cook them a wonderful meal as a gift – using the money she has won on a lottery ticket. The sensational flavours of the food and wine open up their hearts to one another so that they remember all the good times they have shared together. Their friendship is renewed and their sour looks and words are changed into sweet words and humour.

Chocolat is based in a French small town that is strictly Catholic and served by a baby faced Priest who likes singing Elvis Presley songs as he sweeps the church yard but is constantly over ruled and dominated (like everyone in the town) by the Mayor who is

a kill joy of the most bigoted kind. Every sermon the Priest delivers must be checked and corrected by him so that not one ounce of joy/ love/mercy is ever seen. Into this town which is creaking at the seams with oppression and unhappiness comes Vianne to open her Chocolaterie (chocolate shop) and produce the wonderful recipes to suit and unlock each person's personality and expose their human weaknesses and strengths.

Mid August Lunch (*Pranzo di Ferragosto*) is the story of Gianni – a middle aged man and son of an ageing widow who is in debt up to his ears. To help clear his debts he is persuaded into “granny sitting” his mother and 3 other octogenarians for 36 hours and providing one gorgeous lunch and a couple of tasty snacks for these ladies and his well wine soaked buddy. The food is delightful and the 4 elderly women each splendid in their personalities and characters and the experience they bring of life. He pampers and spoils them to pay off his debts and also because these women cleverly manipulate him so beautifully and use their cash to make him cook all the delicacies they love and aren't supposed to eat. They admire him and make him cook for them, dance with them and he gently holds them all together- or at least the food does – even when they are jealous of one another, or want to hog the small portable TV or even when one of them disappears to a near by bar to have a drink and he has to retrieve her – but not without a kiss.

These films are more than sentimental – they are full of reality but they show the power of eating together and how this can ease getting on (and if the food is good enough) stop our friendships drying up.

Why did Jesus call us to eat together?! Well it is very hard for those that meet together, and eat together to stay miserable, to hold grudges...

READ James 3: 13 – 18 . This refers to the jealousy, bitterness and selfishness which can flow out of lives. God's wisdom is not made of these things: it is pure, peaceable, gentle, friendly, compassionate and produces a harvest of good deeds - free from prejudice and hypocrisy. (NB *If we lack wisdom we are to ask for it!*)

Jesus of course is a better (and more demanding in a way) host than Babette, Vianne or Gianni and we as Disciples of Jesus are held together by more than good food and chat but still it is part of being fully human to eat together with Jesus at the centre.

This meal with the person Jesus and shared together helps produce the inner change that can bring us together but also keep us together. (As we sang this morning – *Jesus you are changing me as I let you rain supreme within my heart*).

Sweetness and peace can begin to flow. The sour & the bitter rivalries or jealousy do not need to flow. They cannot both flow out of the same outlet. This is the ongoing presence & work of Jesus – Jesus who does not die like the founder of a local church, or a chef, however, good or the best chocolate maker in the world.

Eating with friends around the Lord Jesus is like no other meal on earth. Here the sour and bitter can become sweet and the fruit of our lips be pure, peaceable, gentle, friendly and compassionate NOT be jealous or envious & lead to betrayal.