

Sermon

Week 2 - The Real Presence of Christ¹

Year B 2021, Pentecost 10, John 6:24-35



The Oscar-winning movie *Babette's Feast*, directed by Gabriel Axel, invites you to swoon over the sensory and spiritual experience of the climactic meal, as if you are eating it yourself. By the end of the film, you are convinced - within food there is divinity.

Set in the 19th century, sisters Martine and Philippa live in Jutland, a small village on the remote west coast of Denmark. Their father was the founding pastor of a local Protestant community. With their father now

¹ With acknowledgement to Wolfhart Pannenberg.

dead, and the austere sect drawing no new converts, the aging sisters preside over their dwindling congregation.

The story flashes back to their youth. Martine is courted by a charming young Swedish cavalry officer, Lorens Löwenhielm, on his visit to his aunt in Jutland, and Philippa by a Parisian opera singer, on retreat to the coast. However, with their father rejecting both marriage offers, the sisters decide to stay with their father in Jutland.

Now, they hear a knock on the door. Babette Hersant introduces herself, through a letter saying that she is a refugee from Paris, and recommending her for housekeeping work. With no money to take her in, Babette offers herself for free. Where for the next 14 years, she prepares food to a quality to which the poor congregation is unaccustomed. Slowly, but surely, she is accepted by them. Over time, her one connection to Parish is a lottery ticket which a friend renews for her each year.

One day, Babette receives a letter from Parish notifying her that she has won the lottery, and enclosing a cheque for the very large sum of 10,000 francs. But instead of returning to Paris, Babette decides to host a 'real French dinner' for the sisters and their small congregation, on the anniversary of the pastor's hundredth birthday. A banquet feast, the meal is an outpouring of Babette's appreciation, an act of self-sacrifice, of thanksgiving. As Babette spends her entire fortune on the meal, but tells no one.

With the sisters accepting her offer, Babette arranges for her nephew to go to Paris to gather the supplies for the feast. The ingredients are plentiful,

sumptuous, and exotic, and their arrival causes much discussion in the village. As the exotic ingredients arrive and preparations commence, the austere sisters begin to worry that the meal may become a sin of sensual luxury, if not the work of the devil himself. After a conference, the sisters and the congregation agree they will eat the meal, but will not speak of any pleasure in doing so, nor mention the food during the dinner.

Martine's former suitor, Lorens is now a famous general married to a member of the Queens Court. Coming as the guest of his aunt, the local lady of the manor and a member of the old pastor's congregation, he is not aware of the congregation's plans. And as a man of the world and former attache in Paris, he is the only person at the table qualified to assess the quality of meal. He provides the other celebrants 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. As old wrongs are forgotten and ancient loves rekindled. As a mystical redemption 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, they are aghast. It is then that Babette reveals to them her secret - that she was formerly the head chef of the Café Anglais and tells them that dinner for 12 there has a price of 10,000 francs. When Martine says through tears, "Now you will be poor the rest of your life", Babette says, "I will never be poor." Philippa then says: "But this is not the end, Babette. In

paradise you will be the rich woman God meant you to be" and then embraces her with tears in her eyes saying: "Oh, how you will enchant the angels!". With acknowledgment to Wikipedia.

Within food, there is divinity. In the bread, in the wine, there is Jesus. And with him, the kingdom of God.

With the bread and the wine, Jesus is present, in his whole and undivided self. With the bread and the wine, Jesus is offering himself to us. And with him, the kingdom of God.

In Jesus Christ, present in the sacrament, God issues his invitation to the world. To enter into the kingdom of God.

It is Jesus himself who invites, as the host of Christian liturgical celebration. The Lord and Head of the Christian Church. He is here.

In the bread, in the wine, we come to Jesus. In him, the future kingdom of God, is now. The salvation of God, is here. In his resurrected, glorified, exalted life, present within the Lord's Supper, the future kingdom of God, is here. The future destiny of the human race, is here. The future, is now, in each local celebration of the worldwide Christian church.

‘The time is fulfilled. And the kingdom of God has drawn near. Repent, and believe in the good news.’

The message of Jesus himself, is now the message of the worldwide Christian church. The good news, in a world of bad news. The light, in a dark world. The joy, in the misery. The hope, in the despair.

The kingdom of God is free. But it is not cheap. There is no such thing as a free lunch. The kingdom of God, is reserved for the follower of Jesus. The kingdom meal, is for Christian disciples. The Christian table is a reserved table. The kingdom of God, reserved, for the follower of Jesus. For anyone who hears the starkness of the call to follow Jesus, and, hearing it, acts upon it. There is a cost to discipleship. And the cost, is your very life. Your life, in this world of human sin.

Jesus said, 'If anyone wants to become my disciple, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?'

In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the future is now. Salvation is now. Grace, is now. The kingdom, is now. And anyone who, counting the cost, will follow Jesus, will heed his call, and who does it, who will follow him into the way of his cross, will find themselves, to their complete and utter surprise, already now living in the kingdom of God. Already now

living in the dawn light of the new day. Already now standing on the distant shore, of the future kingdom of God.

Jesus' resurrection from the dead, Jesus' appearances to his disciples, over a common meal, on the Road to Emmaus, on the beach at dawn, by a charcoal fire, signal the dawning of a new day, by the fire of the Holy Spirit, on the shore ground, of a new Kingdom.

In his resurrected, glorified, exalted life, Jesus Christ is Present in Eucharistic celebration, in fulfilment of his promise, 'Take, eat; this is my body', in the power of the same Spirit that raised him from the dead.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!