

Over the last three weeks, at the 9.30 service we have looked at the meaning of miracle of the feeding of the five thousand; the Eucharistic symbolism of this act, and the shocking challenge posed to the Jews – to eat and drink the body and blood of Christ.

Last Sunday, Catherine spoke of Jesus the Bread of Life, who nourishes our spiritual needs, inspires us and gives us grace for living vital and active lives and through whom we come to know God, forgiveness of sins and the hope of eternal life.

I am reminded of a film I watched some time ago, recommended by our former curate, Martin Booth. The film is **Babette's feast**. Some of you may have seen it or heard of it.

The film is about an austere Christian sect, living in a remote Danish village, set in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The priest who originally founded the community is long since deceased, but the people strive to follow their simple life of piety and charitable works, under the leadership of his two now elderly daughters.

The two daughters, are attractive and gifted – one has a beautiful singing voice – and has been offered the chance of a career in opera. Both have turned down offers of marriage or life outside the community, as father's vision has made them wary of worldly concerns, and they have resolved instead to continue to work tirelessly amongst the poor.

But then something out of the ordinary happens ....

One stormy night a woman appears at their door, a refugee from the terrors of the French civil war, whose husband and son have perished. This is Babette, a former talented chef from Paris. Having lost everything, she spends the next fifteen years in the role of domestic servant, cooking and preparing simple meals of split cod and ale bread – the staple diet of the community. It was unappetising, meagre fare.

Meanwhile, the aging community have begun to lose their former vitality and devotion, inspired by their founder, and have fallen into the habit of quarrelling and general discontent. Although they have continued their efforts to uphold their religious way of life, something has been lost. Their upright moral behaviour has given way to small minded pettiness, in their insular community.

The mood has become gloomy, and this is emphasised by which though the sombre visual effects of the film.

In an attempt to uplift the community, the sisters decide to hold a simple celebration, on what would have been their father's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday.

As the date approaches, there is another turn of events - Babette receives word that she has won 10,000 francs in the French lottery, thanks to a ticket an old friend of hers had renewed each year.

No longer poor it is an opportunity for Babette to leave the community and return to life in the outside world.

Instead, she seeks the sister's permission to prepare a real French meal in their father's honour and rather reluctantly they agree. In preparation for the feast, lavish supplies begin to arrive from Paris, such as the people have never dreamed ... quails, fine wines and so on. This is quite a contrast to the grey, dreary back drop, as bright colours of fruits, vegetables and other tempting fare appear on the screen.

The locals are perplexed .... all this goes against their simple, austere way of living, however the community agree to attend the meal, but resolve that they will keep their minds on higher things, as if they have no sense of taste.

When the evening arrives Babette immerses herself in elaborate preparations for the meal. Meanwhile the guests arrive in sombre dress and a demeanour in high contrast to the sumptuous meal set before them.

This memorial banquet is reminiscent of the Last Supper. Twelve are seated at the table, thirteen if you include Babette who is preparing the meal.

Although the communities' strategy is to remain disengaged from the pleasure of the meal, course by course, the guests begin to respond to the feast itself and gradually, *importantly* they begin respond to each other. Grace begins to flow through the meal.

Old quarrels are healed and past sins forgiven. The scene, formerly grey and austere, gradually becomes illuminated, alongside the love and forgiveness which begins to flow. Conversation takes place about the days of early inspiration by their founder, when life was filled with promise and miracle.

Even when the dinner is over and the people leave the party, they join hands in a circle and begin to dance and sing.

Babette has spent all her lottery winnings and given up the opportunity to return to her native land. In doing so, has transfigured the main characters' world through her own loving act of self-giving love.

However, what Babette, the Christ-like figure *has* achieved, is to cause an awakening amongst the characters, allowing them to experience the fullness of life. Through the sharing of the meal, they have been transformed.

On one level the story could be seen as a group of stuffy, old fashioned folk who are rather glum who, experiencing a wondrous meal, are initiated into the delights of enjoying the pleasures of life.

Beyond the narrative of a simple story is ..... an exploration of how, through the sharing of eucharist, we may be transformed.

**The film does pose some questions:**

Does living the Christian life mean that we are to *endure* the present world as a place of testing, to the extent that we do not realize fulfilment?

Is discipleship *just* about morally correct behaviour, avoiding sin and at the same time doing good works?

Is the Christian life about the realization, at least partially, we may find fulfilment here and now as we work towards creating the Kingdom of heaven in this world?

Babette's feast is about the reconciliation of all things in a banquet that feeds not only the body, but the soul, that not only sustains but transfigures it - all the longings of the heart of filled, all hungers met.

**Amen**