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Four Snapshots and a Question

The ferry steamed across the glittering Aegean to a distant island. You could tell the seasoned backpackers as those who had unfurled their bedrolls on the hot deck of the shaded side of the ship. It decanted six of us on the quay and pulled away. Three Brits, one Oz, one Dutch, and one Dane, with a common language of some English; only two of us spoke any Greek. Unlike other islands, there were no local villagers to greet us, offering to rent rooms out in its small whitewashed town. At the far end of a long beach, we laced two "bivvys" together and strung them between the lemon trees—our home until the ferry returned three days later.

That evening, the only places to eat were *estiatoria*, producing only bread and single-pot meals in the large ovens dominating the back of the owners' houses. One welcoming owner explained he had only one big meal available that evening—no choice. I ordered beers, ouzos for aperitifs, and food for all six of us. Although we had not met until boarding that ferry, we had no option but to share and eat what was served—and get to know each other. Mezes with fresh olives and tomatoes, picked in front of our eyes, accompanied that ouzo. A steaming dish appeared. We ladled out the stew and tore hunks of warm, peasant-style bread. Beneath the wonderfully spiced tomatoes, onions, and aubergines,[1] one of our number speared an unknown piece of meat with her fork, asking, "What in God's name are we eating?"

That was a great question to ask, particularly for me as a Christian. Had I ever really thought about the broader implications of my diet? It

1. That is, eggplant.

brought memories flooding back. Over the course of a few years, I had heard Charles Elliott, then Director of Christian Aid, speak at a variety of conferences, clergy seminars, and student events. Over the years he had repeatedly made the point that if all the world's citizens were to have life, then we should all start living like Chinese peasants. That meant a diet with a main staple (theirs was rice) served most often with vegetables but a few times weekly with a small amount of fish or chicken, all sourced within a few miles of home.

In the intervening generation, China has moved from its post-Cultural Revolution phase to a dynamic BRIC economy,[2] changing the shape of world trade. It is becoming "Westernized" in lifestyle and diet. More food variety is demanded there and more meat per capita is now consumed there than ever before. Far fewer in the 2010s live like the Chinese peasants whom Charles Elliott was calling us to emulate.

But that changing world with its global and instant telecommunication is one that has even more starving and drought-stricken people today than thirty-plus years ago when Charles Elliott was speaking so prophetically. "What in God's name are they *not* eating?" "Enough" is the simple answer and we are part of the reason why.

I was born within eighteen months of 1954's ending of meat-rationing in Britain. My Scottish childhood was a time of thrift and austerity, with the freshest vegetables coming from Dad's allotment. By the 1960s, we were in Manchester in northern England, discovering such surprises as initially yoghurt and shortly afterwards Italian rarebit (pizza!). Then other mainland European staple products made their way into our local Spar shop for the first time. Back then olive oil was something bought from pharmacies in tiny bottles for medicinal purposes. I grew up with the Sunday roast eked out for three days, New Zealand lamb and Argentinean corned beef. But when visiting my Birmingham-based grandparents, we would go to Ladypool Road's Caribbean and Asian grocers, with their oils, spices, capsicums, yams, and sweet potatoes, as well as an invitation to dip a finger into a pot of magical ghee.

2. In economics, BRIC is a group acronym (invented by UK professor, Jim O'Neill) for four countries in a rapidly advancing stage of leading global economic development. These countries are Brazil, Russia, India, and China, hence BRIC.

Now we grow as many vegetables as our small plots allow. We bake our own bread, using organic[3] stone-ground flour from across the county, unless our weekend guests get tempted by the Cotswold's Stroud Saturday-market baker. We choose to buy meat for our guests from an organic, free-range butcher, with eggs from friends' chickens, and honey from nearby apiaries. We swap these as well as our home-made jams and hedgerow wines to broaden our diet.

But garlic, spices, rice, pasta, orange juice, our morning tea, evening hot chocolate, and my daily coffee and banana—even if they are fair-traded—and many other things all travel too many miles. We could not survive without tinned tomatoes to supplement our annual home-grown harvest, or goodly bottles of olive oil, or tinned sardines (necessary with my cardiac meds)—all shipped across Europe. This means that we have yet much more to question—as Christians, as people, and as citizens of God's world. "What in God's name are we eating?"

Long before that Greek island backpacking trip, I had realized that *how* we eat is important. I had learned that through family gatherings, church hospitality, and shared student houses. But had I made enough of the connections? When I was at seminary, we still had three meals a day provided in a refectory, eating far too much for predominantly sedentary students. I was not the only one to see the disconnection between chapel sermons about "Christian responsibility in God's world" before trooping off to eat gut-busting dinners with a choice of wines and beers. Yet little changed.

During a lifetime of Christian leadership and ministry, I have been privileged to travel the world, receive many types of generous hospitality, and rediscover the importance of how we share food. I love to cook for others. So I used that in ministry for congregational gatherings and smaller teaching groups—people celebrate and learn better with food. I encouraged home-groups never to meet without eating together. It is far easier to say, "Come for a meal" than "Come to a Bible study or Sunday worship" and the truth is that people came. (Much of that story is told elsewhere.[4])

There was enough ground-breaking documentary evidence in this for my successful doctoral thesis at Princeton, USA. But if this is the main

3. In the UK, the term "organic" now has a legal meaning when applied to any food-stuff, animal or plant. It means that it has not been produced using chemical additives, whether as growth hormones, health supplements, or fertilizers/herbicides.

4. Francis, *Hospitality and Community.*

dish, there is also an ongoing huge "side order," which has to question how and what folk are eating in their everyday lives as Christians. Whether we live in the formal dinner- or supper-party or chips-on-the-wall circuits, our shopping-and-eating lives as Christians tell our family, friends, and neighbors what we think belonging in God's world means. "What in God's name are you eating?"

These four snapshots lead me to big questions:

How and why do our shopping-and-eating habits demonstrate who we are as Jesus' disciples and both stewards and citizens in God's world? This book sets out to explore those very questions—biblically, theologically, and practically. The book is set out in four sections.

- These opening four snapshots capture various points of realization that thinking people—people of faith, but particularly those who claim to be Christian—have a challenge to face up to. This will lead us to "cooking up a storm" as each of us realizes that we are part of the solution as well as being part of the problem. This is the first part of the how question.
- This demands that we re-examine "the nature of the challenge." The true situation and problem issues need to be identified at a global level from our local perspective. We then have to apply our worldview, be that philosophically or from a faith perspective, to determine whether and how the case needs to be addressed. This is the second part of the how question.
- I have identified seven key issues that must have their rationale explored, to advance our own thinking. Each issue has its own chapter.
- This revolution will not be televised[5]—it will begin with you and me wanting to change the world, in God's name. This section begins with a "Start here" chapter—more than fifty ways to change and consolidate our personal diets and lifestyle for the sake of all God's people. Change will happen only as we and like-minded others develop "a global strategy," rooted in biblical thinking and the Jesus narrative. It is only as we also increasingly apply these to our everyday living that the relevance of the why question (above) will become more apparent

5. Scott-Heron, "Revolution," 77.

to those around us. Finally I offer seven brief conclusions and a select bibliography.

These words of Wendell Berry explain why we must do this:

> Eating with the fullest pleasure—pleasure, that is, that does not depend on ignorance—is perhaps the profoundest enactment of our connection with the world. In this pleasure we experience and celebrate our dependence and our gratitude, for we are living from mystery, from creatures we did not make and powers we cannot comprehend.[6]

Everybody has to eat, except maybe those stereotypical South Asian sadhus who seem to live on goats' milk, honey, and fruit juice. If we have an ounce of compassion, we cannot look at the victims of starvation, particularly children with bulging eyes and swollen bellies, without realizing what an immense privilege we have in the affluent West to choose what we eat. Even the most cash-strapped among us still have that choice. Sometimes it takes such shocking pictures of the starving to remind us of that. But what is important is that we consider both how and what we are eating as citizens of a planet with only finite resources, including food.

6. Berry, "Pleasures," 110.