

# The Missing Ingredient

I wonder what you are looking forward to most tomorrow. The obvious answer is presents, but I suspect that just as important for many of us will be the food. Christmas celebrations and food are very much tied together.

If you are to think about Christmas' past I suspect that many of your reminiscences would involve food. For me it would be the sight of the wonderful golden Turkey wrapped in bacon and sausages with stuffing being put on the table with the bread sauce, Yorkshire pudding, roast potatoes and a meal that would stretch from mid afternoon to the early or late evening.

Then there would be memories of times that things didn't go so right. The way all in my family would burn our tongues on Christmas Eve eating mince pies straight out of the microwave, the year that due to some technical difficulties we had cup a soup for the Christmas lunch. And then the year that Mum couldn't find one of her tea towels only to realise that she had left it inside the Turkey which was now filled with stuffing, sown up and in the oven.

The link between food and Christmas is certainly born out in the statistics. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2007 over \$18.125 billion dollars was spent at retailers in December. Of that amount \$7.286 billion was spent at food retailers and a further \$2.220 billion was spent at cafés, restaurants and fast food outlets. \$9.5 billion dollars worth of food. Now there's some food for thought.

With so much being spent on food it is no surprise that supermarkets want us to think about more and more ingredients, sea food, cherries so they can get a bigger slice of the pie or turkey as the case may be.

Now as many of you know, I love my food but the problem is that a Christmas focused on food can leave us simply full feeling bloated and perhaps a bit queasy, and not filled with the joy and peace which Christmas promises.

This is because for so many there is a missing ingredient in Christmas: Jesus, whose birth we celebrate this night. So tonight to keep the food, MasterChef: MasterChrist theme going I would like to present you with a 3 course sermon with Jesus as the ingredient



MasterChrist

**DOES YOUR CHRISTMAS  
HAVE A MISSING  
INGREDIENT?**

<b>ENTRÉE: JESUS: GOD WITH US</b>
-----------------------------------

Firstly our entrée: Jesus, God with us, or to give the more exotic name “Immanuel”

At the heart of the Christmas message is that God has come to be with us, all that we understand of God became human. Any religion can claim that God is great, it doesn't take much to figure that out. But that God could become so little is only something that the coming of Jesus could teach us. We should never sing “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the incarnate deity” without the deepest sense of wonder that God truly visited this planet.

Of course there will be some who will want to see all this as a myth, in fact I had a conversation to such an effect with a young man on the steps of the Cathedral just yesterday. “Jesus didn't exist” he told me. But if you look at history Jesus is certainly hard to myth, if you will excuse the pun. Jesus of Nazareth is one of the best attested facts of the ancient world and not just in the Bible but in Jewish and Roman histories of the time. But don't take my word for it, do what the Shepherds did and check this out for yourselves.

Certainly Matthew and Luke as they tell their story of the birth of Jesus do so in such a way to reinforce that this is not a once upon a time story, but happened in the real world: Luke makes sure we know who was the Roman Emperor at the time and Matthew gives Jesus' family tree and tells of the terror of living under the reign of Herod which forced Jesus to become an asylum seeker in Egypt.

Herod killed 2 of his brothers in law, his own wife and 2 of his children. As he approached his death he had many people arrested and ordered that they be executed when he died so that there would be an appropriate sense of mourning. The murder of a few children in a provincial town which follows the visit of the wise men would mean nothing to such a man. Matthew's story fits well into this historic reality and this is the world into which Jesus was born. The story which the Bible presents is not a fairytale world but it is our world, where there is poverty, violence and struggles for power.

A few years ago I spent some time reading through some old Christmas carols and I was surprised as to how often there was a verse about how Herod tried to kill Jesus by killing all the babies in Bethlehem. Perhaps we don't help our understanding of Christmas by dropping out such verses. With our images and songs of little Jesus “no crying he makes” we make the story so sweet that we can't taste the tang of the true taste of Christmas with us in the real world.

Perhaps we should sing Carols which speak of Herod's violence as it would remind us of the reality of these stories and that God is with us. Not just with us in the good time of Christmas but in some of the grim realities of life.

If we had time we could look at Jesus whole life and see how he experienced so many things that are common to humanity, family life, being a refugee, estrangement from family, death of loved one, tiredness, hunger. He enjoyed a party, and interestingly given my theme of a Christmas feast he was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard. He even felt separation from God and shared the human experience to the very end, to the death.

This is one of the great truths of Christmas and of Christianity. In the birth of Jesus as “Immanuel”, as “God with us” we can know that God “feeleth for our sadness and shareth in our gladness.” He identifies with our hopes, our fears, our joys, our sorrows, our certainties and confusion and he promises to be with us and when we pray to him he understands, he has been here.

This is the entree of our great Christmas feast. A God who understands, this is worth celebrating.

## MAIN COURSE: JESUS OUR SAVIOUR

As we let that idea settle we come to our main course: Jesus our Saviour. This idea is at the very heart of Christmas and stands at the heart of the proclamation by the Angels to those shepherds who were watching by night. "Today in the town of David as Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord" or as we have been putting it this year *Master Christ*

Now there are a number of ideas here that are well worth chewing over for Jesus comes as saviour in a number of ways.

### **By his life**

Jesus comes as our saviour as a number of levels. By his life and teaching he shows that the ways of this world: of power and violence, materialism and selfishness are not the ways of God. Jesus points to another way, a way of service, of care of love and humility. He taught of loving enemies, welcoming the outcast, or raising up the poor. Though a King Jesus chose the path of humble service. His humble birth and early years as a refugee show the depth of his identity with the disadvantaged.

Fascinatingly much recent historical research on Jesus life has focused on the one of Jesus most powerful ways of teaching his acceptance of the disaffected and outcasts was to share a meal with them. Table fellowship with those who others looked down on was a radical and visible symbol of the new community that Jesus was starting. This may cause us to wonder who we are willing to invite to our table?

If we will but listen to Jesus and to his teaching we will be saved from a life which focuses on things that don't really matter or last and focus on love, relationships and service. To really confuse our imagery, at this point Jesus is not only ingredient but recipe.

### **By his death**

He is also our saviour by his death. In Matthew's Gospel the angel tells Joseph that the child to be born is to be called Jesus, which means God is salvation, because he will save the people from their sins. We are separated from God because we do not live as we should. But Jesus not only looks to restore human relationships but our relationship with God through forgiveness, for which Jesus himself pays the price.

Whilst the Bible gives many images to help us understand how this works, a sacrifice, a ransom and so on the most powerful image, which Jesus himself gave us is that of a meal, the symbols of bread and wine. "This is my body which is given for you for the forgiveness of sins." It is a meal that still before us this evening and in which we can still share.

### **By his resurrection**

Finally he saves us by his resurrection. By his rising to new life, in part proved by eating, Jesus' claims about himself are vindicated, he is the Master Christ, his way of life is vindicated, his claims to deal with sin is vindicated. But also importantly for us his claim of giving eternal life is vindicated for he is the working model of salvation. As they say in the cooking programmes, here's one I prepared earlier.

And just to finish of the idea what is Jesus favourite image of the eternal life he promises and the Kingdom of God: it is a banquet, a feast to which all are invited. A wonderful image a world put right and to be enjoyed.

## DESSERT: JESUS: JOY TO THE WORLD

Now you might think that this enough to fill you up but there is always space for dessert. And what can there be for dessert after that than Jesus: our joy and peace. It naturally follows at the end of such a meal. The lovely sweet taste of knowing of God's love in Jesus as Emmanuel, the rich satisfying experience of knowing that we are saved from a misspent life, that there is forgiveness, that we don't get our just desserts, and we have the glorious hope of eternal life.

## **CONCLUSION: GRACE**

So here is the God's sumptuous Christmas Feast spread before us, full of love, joy, hope and peace but with only one ingredient: Jesus.

But how do partake in this banquet, to make this meal our own. You start the way that Christians throughout the ages have started all their meals. You say Grace. You thank God for what he has so freely provided in Jesus and then it is all yours and you make it your own.

I pray that tonight as you come to share in the bread and wine before us, but also tomorrow as you have your own Feast of Christmas, you will say Grace, you will thank God for his provision of Jesus and then you won't have a missing ingredient in your Christmas and you will have a peace and joy that will last long beyond dessert.