

Sunday 6th January 2019
10am Revd Canon Dr Stephen Evans



Hinde Street Methodist Church

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Epiphany 3 2019

A few weeks ago, I watched again, for the first time in 30 years, the Oscar-winning film *Babette's Feast*.

The film from a short story by Karen Blixenⁱⁱ (writing as Isak Dinesen) is set in a bleak, dour, colourless community on the wind-swept and isolated coast of Jutland.

Two ageing sisters, the daughters of a long-dead puritan Danish Lutheran pastor, take into their modest home, a penniless woman fleeing from the Siege of Paris following the Franco-Prussian War.

For fourteen years, the woman, who had lost everything, shares the sisters' modest home and simple way of life, cleaning their house and cooking the most basic of food in return for her board and lodging.

As year succeeds year, life is as unrelentingly monotonous, grey, cold and hard as the landscape in which it is lived out; utterly devoid of joy or colour.

Into this, however, comes a letter from France telling Babette that she has won a fortune in the Lottery due to the generosity of a friend who has bought her a Lottery ticket every year since she had to flee her home and her country.

The sisters, who have come to rely on Babette are, understandably, panic-stricken by the thought that the suddenly-rich Babette will up-sticks, leave them and move back to France, but Babette's response is not to announce her departure but to say that she would like to prepare a proper French dinner to thank the sisters for taking her into their home and to celebrate what would have been the pastor's 100th birthday.

The isolated community is intrigued and appalled in equal measure as the packages ordered from France by Babette come into their village by boat - fine china, sparking crystal, rare wines, crisp linen, a crate of chirruping quails, jars of caviar and an enormous live turtle.

On the evening of the dinner, the guests sit down at the sisters' beautifully dressed table terrified about what they might be expected eat.

Their lives of pious and strict asceticism have, of course, not prepared any of them for a meal like this and, in order to stay true to their founding-pastor's strict injunctions and not to be led into the ways of temptation, they determine not to enjoy a single mouthful of the meal that unfolds course after course before them and to regard the finest wine that France could offer, served in exquisite crystal, as nothing but water.

As the meal progresses, however, smiles begin break through the masks of their self-enforced severity, tongues are loosened with conversation, joyful long-forgotten memories are recalled, and past quarrels and hurts are forgiven.

A community that had been breaking under the dead weight of the old-pastor's dour legacy, finds, through a shared meal provided by one women's unbelievable generosity, its wholeness and its healing - even though, unbeknown to the guests, the meal has cost Babette every penny of her Lottery winnings.

Lavish generosity is, of course, what lies at the heart of today's Gospel reading: in fact, 720 bottles of generosity!

The villagers were afraid of Babette's feast because they understood it as a distraction from carrying out the will of God - a sinful dwelling in the things of this life that would prevent them from seeking the Kingdom of Heaven.

By the end of the meal, however, the villagers had come to understand that the feast, rather than distracting them, had, in fact, united them, healed them, restored them and given them a foretaste on earth of the banquet that awaits them in heaven.

At the very start of Jesus' ministry - in Cana of Galilee, and on the Cross of Calvary on Good Friday, we see that God holds nothing back; that God gives generously and goes on giving to his creation, even though the cost is everything.

After the meal, when Babette is revealed as the one-time greatest chef in the whole of France, she says, "*A great artist is never poor. We have something of which other people know nothing*".

Cosmo Gordon Langⁱⁱⁱ, summed it up like this a hundred years ago:

Our lives and our circumstances may seem of incapable of fulfilling a divine purpose; yet it is through our lives and our circumstances that the divine purpose is to be fulfilled ... the Christian is the true artist of life ... it is not too much to say that the main business of the Christian life is to go through the world turning its water into wine.

What a wonderful description of our Christian calling. "*To go through the world turning its water into wine ... sharing something of which other people know nothing.*"

- bringing joy, where we find sorrow;
- healing, where we encounter brokenness;
- exhibiting generosity, where we encounter parsimony and meanness of spirit;
- bringing life and renewal where we find death and decay;
- being the salt, that gives the world its savour, and the light which gives the world its direction.
- turning the water of our everyday, humdrum, ordinary, experience into the new wine of the Kingdom and letting others drink deeply from it.

By God's grace, may we live the ever-generous life of God's Kingdom, may we drink deeply of the wine that Jesus draws from the water of life, and may our lives be his invitation to others to come to the heavenly banquet to which all are called. Amen.

ⁱ *Babettes gæstebud*, 1987, directed by Gabriel Axel

ⁱⁱ *Anecdotes of Destiny*, 1958

ⁱⁱⁱ Archbishop of Canterbury 1928 - 1942