

Mean Eating

There is phenomenal interest in food in our country just now. It ranges across the gifted amateur's ambition to reproduce the culinary triumphs of Cordon Bleu or Cuisine Nouvelle, by way of the dazzled tourist's longing to taste again in Grantham what he ate in the little open-air trattoria on the Canal Grande, or the quiet country restaurant in Périgord; it calls in at the countless homemakers who want to make the most of their daily spread, and the student or jobless needing to be told how to live on what's cheap. It dominates discussion amongst environmentalists and Greens, who want to tell us how much it costs to feed a cow as compared to a human being, and how we endanger the balance of nature by our tasteless insistence on asparagus in October, with petrol blazing through internal combustion engines across the globe to gratify our pampered and unseasonable whims.

Beneath all of these interests lies the dull ground-note of the world's two-fifths' hunger and thirst, so easily forgotten amidst the *embarras de richesses*, our tortured quandary (Sainsbury's today, or Waitrose?).

We're not so far apart from the hungry world as we pretend (or, perhaps, fear). Our very need for food is exactly like the need of a hungry Ethiopian, and when we sit down to eat we are obeying the same nature, which will soon be on its knees if we fail to be fed. This fact makes our daily bread a powerful messenger to us of the needs of all our human family. It would be a poor way of eating if we forgot the fact that, at the other end of the table, so to speak, there's nothing to eat.

I know that if we brought one starving child to every table in Merrie England, *not one child* would go unfed. It is their distance away from us that robs them of our concern. But this too is an illusion. Our help could be with them in less than a week. That's not a real distance: it is a screen. We use a screen to protect ourselves from the fire in winter, or from the sun in summer...or from the hungry, at any time.

One of the nastier ways in which food has possessed our headlines in the last year concerns the growing obesity of Britain. Even our little children, it seems, are suffering surfeits which will see us burying them, instead of vice-versa. It has been refreshing to see Jamie Oliver's project to improve the eating of a London Borough's schools, in the teeth of the pupils' addiction to fat, the sad helplessness of the school cooks to do more than defrost frozen rubbish, and the authorities' complacent assumption that nothing can be done to sort these things out.

I wonder if, with our powerful religious motives, we might make a contribution to the restoration of Generous Eating. I guess the ancient tradition of Grace Before Meals would be a start. Could we, in imagination, make present those hungry little ones whom Jesus has called his own, and sanctify our tables by cancelling our distance from them? Could CaFOD commission a handsome little box, which could appear on our dinner-tables, unobtrusively to accept a little financial generosity when we enjoy a party? If we introduced such a custom on a wide front, it would pass out of gimmickry and into tradition, and the poor would be present at our tables; *that they cannot repay you means you will have treasure in heaven*.