

There is such a thing as a free lunch: report to the Kingston Circuit Meeting 21/6/2011

If you are hungry go to the nearest Sikh Gurdwara and you will be fed. “Not a lot of people know that” as the comedian used to say, but it is true. At the Golden Temple in Amritsar food is served to all comers every day, all day and there are people who simply live off this generosity. The custom is called *langar* and this joy in hospitality is very important to Sikhs. *Langar* expresses a common humanity with neighbours in our need for shared food, and it is a way of living generously in response to a God whom Sikhs, like Christians, know to be generous in his love.

Everyone who works with the Student Societies in our University knows that the Sikh Society is the “Friendly Society” – it is impossible for Sikhs to meet without eating and laughing and it is impossible to join them as a visitor without eating and laughing with them. So the Sikh students decided to hold *langar* in the University. Continuous free food to all comers from 10am to 5pm. They had no budget and no publicity, just an empty room and a supply of traditional food shipped over from a temple in Southall. I went along at 12.30pm for my lunch and they were still waiting for japaties, and nothing could begin without the japaties. “It’s Indian time” they said – “You can say that, but I can’t!” I replied. So I came back at 1pm and 3 hours late the meal began. It’s polite to take off your shoes and cover your head; then just sit on the floor in a long line, pick up the plastic multi-part dish and a supply of aromatic Punjabi food comes your way. There is no proselytising, no information on Sikhi, no charge and no attempt to persuade – this is hospitality in its purest form.

There were also no posters. Someone found a large crayon and ripped pages out of an exercise book - hand scrawled notices for “FREE FOOD” began to appear all over campus. Word spread, and the crowds started to gather. It was a free food flash mob.

We try to do our bit in the chaplaincy. The following week we offered “Free Pancake Tuesday”, taking over a couple of tables in one of the student eateries, handing out pancake tokens and wise words about Lent. We don’t evangelise directly, but still there was some purpose and message in our event – it led to dozens of conversations – lapsed Catholics who suddenly remember they must go to mass on Ash Wednesday (we keep mass times handy, so they have no excuses!), Muslims who know about Ramadan but not about Lent, students who remember that they are going to give up chocolate, talk about food miles, food waste and sustainable food supplies. Yes, even some talk about Easter. It’s the best £50 we spend all year and we get to speak to hundreds of students. Yet we can’t quite let go of the idea that we must give a message out with our Free Lunch. So it’s not really a Free Lunch at all is it – just another attempt to persuade students to our agenda.

I think we have a lesson to learn from our Sikh friends – sometimes the most powerful messages are the ones that you never need to mention. So maybe just sometimes we could live what we believe and treat others to the generosity with which God has treated us - the generosity of unconditional love which invites us to the family table just as we are. The business of learning to be good members of the family can come later. It seems Christians don’t believe in free lunches – welcome to our free Alpha dinner but first you must watch the enlightening video! This is conditional hospitality. Sikh hospitality as I have experienced it is always unconditional. It’s free food because life is good, shared life is better and God is best of all.

If we believe in grace we should think of food not as what we can take away but what God gives away. What about a mission strategy whose success is measured not by how many people have sat in our pews, but by how the number of people who have sat at table with us?