

Film for thought – Babette’s Feast.

In Revelation 3:20 Jesus said: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.”

Many films have food as their focal point: *Chocolat*, *The cook, the thief, his wife and her lover*, *Delicatessen*, *The discreet charm of the bourgeoisie*, *The scent of green papaya* and *Tampopo* to name but a few. But, in my opinion there is none better than this 1987 Danish film, *Babette’s Feast*, which is taken from the short story of the same name written by Isak Dinesen (aka Karen Blixen, who also wrote “*Out of Africa*”).

Babette’s Feast is in a class of its own. It won both the Oscar and Bafta for Best Foreign film in 1988. Any worthy book on film and faith will mention this work of art.

Director, Gabriel Axel, sits firmly in the Scandinavian style of film directing with their fascination between light and dark. There are certainly reminders here of Carl Dreyer’s “*The Word*”, which has the most breath-taking end to a film ever seen (but that’s for another time maybe). Axel also pays his respects to the father of them all – Ingmar Bergman. A seasoned member of his acting ensemble, Jarl Kulle, plays the elderly General Lowenhielm.

It is a film in which food is central, but if you're salivating over the food, you're missing the point.

This film could be seen as one that removes unhelpful barriers.

The two worlds of faith and doubt are interwoven rather than at odds with each other. The centre point is the outsider, Babette Hersant. She subtly (and deliberately?) wakes the sisters up to the legitimate pleasures of life in a village that is driven by the conviction that truth can only be found in their inward looking community. It reminds me of the psychological thriller “*The village*”; again about an up-tight religious community.

It also shows us that the gulf between the spiritual and material can be healed. It is General Lowenhielm who reminisces about the *Café Anglais* in Paris saying: “A dinner was turned into a love affair that made no distinction between bodily and spiritual appetite.”

The film is an excellent interplay of time periods. We dwell in the past where the great Pastor is in complete control and the heavenly future where the aging congregation continually sing their favourite hymn: “*Jerusalem my heart’s true home.*” But it is in the present that they find healing and reconciliation in a sacramental instant which is a blessing in the present moment.

Babette is an exile turned into a sacrifice, like Jesus. The village are suspicious of her to begin with but through small actions she is welcomed and brings joy and pleasure. In the end sacrifice and generosity bring reconciliation.

Decades on this story is still charming and beguiling. It is truly a film that is saturated with kingdom of God.

The worlds of faith and doubt; sacrifice and greed; past, present and future; spiritual and material collide gently in this film and everyone experiences something of the boundary-breaking power of grace.

My hope and prayer is that we will as well...