

Man In the Van! Is That You, Jesus?



Imagine.

Jesus is driving. Sitting next to Him a hungry passenger, He's just collected her from outside Seven Eleven on Fitzroy Street, St Kilda. She's a prostitute, homeless and asserts her right to be Roman Catholic.

It's Lent starting today; Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Easter and you're not meant to be eating meat, that is if you observe Catholic tradition of years ago, where you fasted this day and ate fish on Fridays.

But it's hamburgers and sausages for lunch today at the Sacred Heart Mission.

Oh bother!

Today at The Mission's dining hall is no different from any other day, nutritious meals are served mostly donated by farmers, catering companies, local bakeries, cafes and restaurants, and food rescue agencies.

Jesus and His friend smile in gratitude at the ladies serving fried onions along with the burger, and sit down ready to eat.

Salad is brought to the table. There are sauces ranging from mustard and tomato, a variety of breads and rolls to choose from. But oh dear, it is Ash Wednesday. What to do? 'Do I eat meat when I'm supposed to be fasting?' Jesus' friend worries.

The other patrons either don't notice today is different because it's Ash Wednesday, or like Jesus and His female companion they smile in gratitude at the ladies serving and the other guests at table. They're not alone in their fears and worries..

Grace is not said.

Kirsty, who works as head chef in the kitchen sheds light on another kind of Grace. She says, ["It's far more than a meal on a Holy Day, it's about engaging the people who are often isolated and giving them a sense of community."](#)

The volunteers impress me. Everyday they bring joy to the lives of many who gather here despairing from soul hunger more so than any hunger in their bellies.

There is deep pain. You can almost touch it. It's like a huge balloon, if by accident you prick it, Hell will break loose. Demons might dash out, scream at you, scratch you. ["What are you doing eating meat on the first day of Lent? You've sinned and you're going to that other place for sure,"](#) is the refrain in Jesus' friend's mind. She wants to remain nameless.

The balloon doesn't burst though. There's deep compassion here. Robbie Chaplin, support worker and case manager at The Mission spoke of the Women's Shelter. She said, ["The women that we work with have had decades of abuse and disadvantage and trauma."](#)

In the dining hall one woman who calls herself Lauren tells me that's not her real name, but she likes this name, because it reminds her of her generous Serbian aunty called Lauren, who used to feed her pancakes and soda with fresh lemon juice after school on Wednesdays. Lauren is not depressed today.

Lauren suffers deep depression most days. She can't hold down a job and she undergoes [electroconvulsive therapy \(ECT\)](#) weekly to help her cope. She enjoys coming to The Sacred Heart Mission to eat because she feels safe and accepted by many others suffering mental illness. It doesn't matter to anyone that she can't pay for her own meals. She's welcomed daily, just like I was.

Jason who has been homeless for four months said, ["The Sacred Heart Mission is a lifeline. You can have breakfast, you can have lunch every day, 365 days of the year for free."](#)

He's 24 years old and according to ABC's Madeleine Morris, ["In Australia more than half of the homeless population are under 35 years old"](#), so I shouldn't be surprised that he's homeless at his age.

I didn't tell either Lauren or Jason that I am a journalist. I'm not ashamed of my profession of course, but dining with them I felt it would be intrusive somehow to

disclose this, to say, "I'm actually here to report on how your hands are uncontrollably shaking Jason and that your eyes reveal unquenchable sorrow."

It seemed as wrong for me to share my identity, as it could be to eat meat on Ash Wednesday. You might have a different view.

And since it's Lent afterall, I seek your FORGIVENESS for saying that they served meat at The Sacred Heart Mission on Ash Wednesday. They did no such thing.

My job is to report truth afterall.

As for the man in the van who escorted His lady friend to The Sacred Heart Mission in St Kilda, the locals say He's Jesus.

Is Jesus a friend of liars as well as prostitutes I wonder.

Words by Eyre

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