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## St Mary's in Exile Homily Advent

Advent, with its emphasis on expectant waiting and anticipation reminds us of the ancients or the wise ones before organised religion, whereby the December Solstice was celebrated at huge fire ceremonies to welcome the turning of the season toward the promise of new growth and abundant harvests.

It is this kind of reverence that we, at Food Connect, hold for our network of farmers who provide for us all year round, the bounty of fresh fruit and vegetables, and many other delicious products from this blessed bioregion in which we dwell.

The seeds of my involvement with healthy, ethical food were sown years ago. I began my passion for healthy food while pregnant with my first child. Suddenly my ecological eyes opened for the first time in a very long time, and a thorough analysis of everything I consumed became my daily obsession (with a few exceptions for chocolate, of course). Over the next few years, my growing disdain for excess and our 'fat' way of living brought me sharply to the realisation that 'voluntary simplicity' was the way we had to go if we were going to contribute positively to our immediate environment and the wider issue of climate change.

Today's industrialised system of agriculture contributes to 25% of the world's CO2 emissions, and is heavily reliant on synthetic fertilisers and long transport chains. For example, we live in a ridiculous situation where banana farmers in Cairns must send their produce to the Brisbane central markets, which is then stored and packed into trucks to be sent back to Cairns supermarkets for locals to buy. Industrialised agriculture is said to have brought us many benefits - the stories of Australia's golden era of "riding off the sheep's back" is one example of the nostalgia mistakenly attributed to its 'success'. However, the system has relied on externalising many of its social and environmental responsibilities. How can a system which creates over 1 billion obese people, yet at the same time cause over 1 billion to suffer starvation and malnutrition be a good thing?

The treatment of our animals through factory farming is a shameful way to treat our fellow inhabitants on this planet. Factory farms, including pigs, goats, chickens, and cattle, are packed by the tens of thousands into sheds designed to look after their basic needs of food and shelter in as mechanized a way as possible. The companies running these operations don't have to see, feel or smell the terrible suffering happening everyday. Millions upon millions of animals experience this level of suffering so that we can eat meat without thinking about our actions.

This food system is also dominated by huge corporations with buying policies that force farmers to 'get big or get out'. They squeeze farm gate prices so low through inflexible contracts, that the mental health of our rural community and the subsequent burden on their local economy suffers. The current rural suicide rate is double that of urban rates, and this does not include cars 'running into trees' on country roads. That is Australia - you should see what is happening in India for a more extreme version of the same events.

Our land is eroding and our soil health is degraded, which ultimately affects the nutrient density of our food. Today, you need to eat four apples to get the same level of nutrients as an apple produced 50 years ago. Yet many urban dwellers are oblivious to these facts when they sit down to their meals each day. That is if they *are* sitting down, as many families now eat 'on the run', missing out on that valuable daily connection with their loved ones.

And what does this do to our spiritual connection to the soil that produces our food? How do we appreciate the effort, the elements, and the love that transforms a seed into a plant into a vegetable?

So what are the solutions? There are more and more citizens who are questioning the system that produces the food they're eating, and they're realising just how complex the mess is. The great thinker, R. Buckminster Fuller once said,

*"You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."*

In order for us to transform a system that is unsustainable, deeply unfair and unjust, we need to create a completely new model that is not dominated by one organisation, but like nature, is created by a distributed network of food hubs that is unique to each bioregion on the planet.

Food Connect is a practical example of how each region can support its local farmers, its local economy, its environment and the social fabric of the community it serves. Food Connect is a social enterprise, a not-for-profit, and for-benefit company, founded by my partner, ex-dairy farmer Robert Pekin. After losing the multi-generational family farm in the late '90's and spending subsequent years as an agricultural journeyman, he happened upon the model of Community Supported Agriculture and created a practical solution on the ground in Brisbane in 2004.

Today, Food Connect's vision is to create healthy communities through catalysing local and ethical food enterprises. Based at our Homestead (warehouse) in Salisbury, Food Connect receives produce from around 60 farmers who are located within a two-hour radius of Brisbane city. The farmers produce a broad range of fruit and vegetables (and other products) through ecological farming methods. Our farmers are all different - some certified organic, some biodynamic, others natural, and a few in conversion from conventional farming by withdrawing the use of any chemical sprays - but it all adds up to Sustainable Agriculture.

Around 2,000 city people subscribe (pay in advance) to receive a weekly or fortnightly box of fresh, local, ethical produce and they pick up their box at one of 70 City Cousins (pick up spots) around Brisbane. The City Cousin network is made up of committed community members - mums at home, schools, churches, community centres, health food shops, who open their doors for a few hours each week to welcome subscribers as they pick up their goodies. We call it 'lowering the fences' in the suburbs. We also facilitate community get-togethers and farm tours to deepen the relationship between city people and the farmers who grow their food.

Currently, the central market system pays farmers between 5-15% of the retail dollar for produce. At Food Connect we cut out all the middlemen and run a very lean operation thereby being able to pay 50% of the retail price back to our farmers. This creates a number of benefits. Firstly, the farmer is being paid a fair price for their hard work. They are also being acknowledged for their contribution, thereby encouraging farmers to stay on the land, to become good land custodians, nurturing their soils, and preserving good agricultural land for food growing purposes, and avoiding being taken over by urban sprawl and greedy developers.

As I ask more questions about our food system, it has become more and more clear that the food we take for granted comes from a chain of good people, good soil, good intentions and lots of love. In between looking after our family and my community work in West End, my role here at Food Connect now looks to further develop the business by enhancing the sense of community between subscribers, City Cousins, Homestead staff and farmers.

As Wendell Berry, the renowned Rural Prophet of America once said, "Eating is an agricultural act" - meaning that with every bite you take, every meal you share, you are supporting the system that will either preserve our future on the planet, or the system that will ultimately crash in response to the challenges of peak oil and climate change. To finish, I'd like to quote a passage from Wendell's book, 'Bringing it to the Table':

*"A significant part of the pleasure of eating is one's accurate consciousness of the lives and the world from which food comes. ...Eating with the fullest pleasure - pleasure, that is, that does not depend on ignorance - is perhaps the profoundest enactment of our connection with the world. In this pleasure we experience and celebrate our dependence and our gratitude, for we are living from mystery, from creatures we did not make and powers we cannot comprehend."*