



God Loves a Joke: Babette and Vocation¹

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Babette Hersant is a chef almost as familiar to Americans as Julia Child. She was first created by Karen Blixen, a Dane who chose Isak Dinesen as her pen name and English as her language for composing stories. The witty Dinesen wrote *Babette's Feast* in response to a friend's advice for selling fiction to American magazines: "Write about food," he said. "Americans are obsessed with food." Her novella about the intrepid Babette appeared in *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1950 and has recently been given a second round of life by Gabriel Axel. His 1987 film adaptation earned international awards and glowing reviews, as well as audiences of obsessed Americans who returned for two and three viewings. Now it is available in the video sections of supermarkets.²

I. BABETTE'S VOCATION

Dinesen's story, on the face of it, is an odd candidate for popularity or critical acclaim. It is set among a band of elderly Lutherans who live on a fjord on the northernmost tip of Norway. The plot centers on their gathering to celebrate the 100th birthday of the congregation's founder, now dead: they pray, eat a meal, sing hymns, and go home. That is the outward action. The real action of the story is inward and invisible, deep "down in the domain of human hearts" (4), says the slightly disingenuous narrator, who implies that she will unfold a love story. She

¹To Edna and Howard Hong, in celebration of their eightieth birthdays.

²Quotations will be taken from a recent paperback collection of Dinesen's fiction, entitled *Babette's Feast* (New York: Vintage, 1988). This collection, in a slightly different arrangement, was first issued by Random House in 1953, entitled *Anecdotes of Destiny*. Axel's form is a reverent and inspired adaptation of the novella, and I recommend it to one and all. Axel has set his story in Jutland, Denmark.

does, but at its deepest level this love story seems more suitable for a sermon than for a popular magazine or film. It is about the operation of divine grace; it is about the transformation that love effects through the celebration of communion; it is about vocation, the individual's response to the calling of the Holy Spirit. The divine love story undergirds the whole of *Babette's Feast*, though it is not mentioned on the book cover or film jacket.

The story's immediate appeal comes from the actions of Babette, the Parisian chef who has fled a revolution and for twelve years has been living in the Norwegian village of Berlevaag. In one magnificent gesture, Babette gives away all that she has. She bestows her gift of an elaborate French dinner on people unwilling to receive it and unable to estimate its worth. Indeed, the elderly villagers have taken a vow, which they keep, to remain insensible to food and

drink throughout this meal. But a miracle occurs. These people, who have been quarreling, undergo a transformation during the feast. They leave the celebration with joined hands, stumbling through the deep snow, forgiving and blessing one another: “It was, to each of them, blissful to have become as a small child; it was also a blessed joke to watch old Brothers and Sisters, who had been taking themselves so seriously, in this kind of celestial second childhood” (43).

When her mistresses learn that Babette has spent every last coin of her lottery winnings on the meal they have just consumed, they are aghast. They had no idea a dinner could cost so much, and furthermore they cannot recall a single dish Babette served them. “So you will be poor now all your life?” says Martine sadly. Babette, who has been preparing this feast for a month and a half, is sitting white and exhausted amidst a roomful of dirty cooking pots, but she rises up in great dignity and makes a proclamation: “Poor? No, I shall never be poor. I told you that I am a great artist. A great artist, Mesdames, is never poor. We have something, Mesdames, of which other people know nothing” (47).

Babette has a calling: it is to cook. She asks nothing better than to follow it to the limit. She declares, “Through all the world there goes one long cry from the heart of the artist: Give me leave to do my utmost!” (48). Babette’s words about the inner riches of the artist—“we have something of which other people know nothing”—seem deliberately to play upon Christ’s words in John 4 about his own inner sustenance and calling: “I have food to eat that you do not know about....My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to complete his work.” *Babette’s Feast* is no allegory, but a part of its appeal is the resonance of Babette’s story, about an enormous sacrifice given to people who receive it unwillingly.

Babette has a complex history. Formerly she cooked at the finest restaurant in Paris. She was known all over the city “as the greatest culinary genius of the age,” one who could turn “a dinner at the Café Anglais into...a love affair of the noble and romantic category in which one no longer distinguishes between bodily and spiritual appetite or satiety” (38). In 1871 she gave her all in a different way: she took part in the Communard uprising, against the only people rich enough to pay for her meals and sophisticated enough to appreciate her artistry. These people, she later says, “were evil and cruel. They let the people of Paris starve; they

oppressed and wronged the poor. Thanks be to God, I stood upon a barricade!” (47).

Babette helped destroy the people who sustained her art. But all that sustained her personally was destroyed as well. Her husband and son were shot in these civil wars, and she had to flee across the sea for her life. She appeared on the doorstep of Martine and Philippa’s house, “haggard and wild-eyed,” offering to work without wages. Her letter of introduction said, “Babette can cook.” What remained to her was her calling. For twelve years the former chef at the Café Anglais has served as maid-of-all-work in the household of these pious sisters, where “luxurious fare [is] sinful” and “food must be as plain as possible” so that their small income can be used to feed the poor (16).

Hard times for Babette. But this is the fierce woman who set fire to the houses of those who starved the poor of Paris. And this is an artist. She does not measure according to the standards of the world. She has something of which other people know nothing. Empowered by her calling, she can serve it through the task at hand, however mundane. From the beginning of

her stay in Berlevaag, Babette “miraculously” reduces the cost of the sisters’ housekeeping and transforms the simple food: “the soup-pails and baskets acquired a new, mysterious power to stimulate and strengthen their poor and sick” (16). Babette’s household work is turned into spiritual gifts for the entire community. The sisters now have “time for the confidences and complaints of their old friends and peace for meditating on heavenly matters” (17). The elderly brothers and sisters begin to include Babette’s name in their prayers (though she is Roman Catholic) and to thank God “for the speechless stranger” in their midst. The miracle we witness at the grand feast—the inner transformation of the diners—is merely an intensification of the miracle she has been working through her twelve years of daily toil with the plainest of fare.

II. THE VOCATION OF MARTINE AND PHILIPPA

Babette is the only artist now living in Berlevaag, but she is not the only inhabitant whose life is shaped by a vocation, or the only one who works miracles through her daily tasks. For all the difference in sophistication, she and the two sisters are alike in their unflinching dedication to an exacting discipline. Martine and Philippa (named after Martin Luther and his follower Philip Melancthon) are the daughters of a prophet. Years ago the dean had a vision, and in response he founded a “pious ecclesiastic party or sect, which was known and looked up to in all the country of Norway” (3). For half a century this congregation has been true to his vision, living together simply in love and trust:

Its members renounced the pleasures of this world, for the earth and all that it held to them was but a kind of illusion, and the true reality was the New Jerusalem toward which they were longing. They swore not at all, but their communication was yea yea and nay nay, and they called one another Brother and Sister. (3)

The flock has fallen into quarrels during the year preceding Babette’s feast, but we should not let them distract us from noticing two remarkable features of the dean’s

community: the purity of its institutions and the length of time it has managed to live by them. We are told that even in the face of its recent “sad little schisms” the flock still gathers “together to read and interpret the Word,” and that within the sisters’ house they still feel the presence of the Master’s spirit: “here they were at home and at peace” (4).

The dean has bequeathed his vision and his calling to his two daughters, now middle-aged and unmarried. As young women, we are told, they both possessed an “almost supernatural fairness” and Philippa a sweet singing voice as well, but when marriage and artistic career were offered, the sisters rejected them. They chose to follow their calling: they “had been brought up to an ideal of heavenly love; they were filled with it and did not let themselves be touched by the flames of this world” (5). And they do not waver in their choice. What it costs, they pay.

Their daily life in this remote community of aged Norwegians is no more sad and unfulfilled than that of Babette. They are doing what in their minds is highest and best. Their spirits are dampened by the quarreling that has arisen among the flock of late, for they fear they have failed at their calling. This is the language in which they speak of it:

Would their ever-faithful father look down to his daughters and call them by name as unjust stewards? Between them they talked matters over and repeated their father's saying: that God's paths were running even across the salt sea, and the snow-clad mountains, where man's eye sees no track. (20)

The members of the flock may quarrel with one another, but they look upon Martine and Philippa with love and gratitude. When the talk at dinner is of miracles, or strange happenings during the dean's day, the Brothers and Sisters recall "the smaller miracles of kindness and helpfulness daily performed by his daughters" (39). And when Martine tearfully confesses to them that Babette's dinner may contain food of the devil's own devising, they respond with charity, and courage. For the sakes of their precious little sisters, the old people will brave the forces of evil. They unite to make a vow:

On the day of our master we will cleanse our tongues of all taste and purify them of all delight or disgust of the senses, keeping and preserving them for the higher things of praise and thanksgiving. (27)

This vow leaves them "deeply moved and elevated" (27). It is with their hearts thus united by a purpose of love that they go to the feast. Babette's exquisite food and wine work their miracle of forgiveness and reconciliation, but on hearts that are prepared for the transformation, by the daily miracles wrought by the sisters' high calling, by the trust of the flock in those miracles.

III. THE JOKE OF DIVINE GRACE

The sisters also work miracles in the world far beyond Berlevaag. When they were much younger, the "supernatural fairness" of their faces inspired romantic love in two men from the "great world." Both men left disappointed in their hopes of marriage and also thwarted in their own vocations, but not embittered. The

picture of the beloved that each carries away in his heart is above all one of spiritual beauty, and it has definitive consequences in many lives over the years.

The great baritone Achille Papin hears Philippa singing hymns in church and a vision rises up before him, that he will teach her to sing for the Paris Opera: "My greatest triumphs are before me! The world will once more believe in miracles when she and I sing together" (10). But after a too ardently sung duet from *Don Giovanni*, Philippa has him dismissed as her voice teacher. Fifteen years later when his desperate friend Babette asks him if he knows any "good people" in Norway, the faces of the sisters, "sacred to my heart" (14), rise up before him. That is how they get their miraculous maid-of-all-work, because Papin remembers all these years not only that duet but also the goodness that illuminated the faces of both sisters.

Martine's would-be lover offers a more complex story about vocation. Lt. Loewenhielm is a fast-living young cavalry officer whose father has ordered him to the home of an elderly aunt in Berlevaag, "to meditate and to better his ways" (5). He has no calling beyond his own pleasure. Then he sees Martine's face, and in its physical loveliness, which arouses his desire, he comprehends the spiritual ideal: there rises "before his eyes a sudden, mighty vision of a higher

and purer life” (6). But the more time he spends with her, in the midst of the dean’s flock, the more he feels his own distance from this exacting standard of love and community as well as his own inability to follow it. The perception makes him miserable: he “loathed and despised the figure which he himself cut in her nearness” (6). He leaves Berlevaag without declaring his love for Martine and returns to his garrison. And now he cannot find any connection between the world of his fellow officers and the one in Berlevaag. In a panic over the despair that has arisen out of such a “pitiful” episode—his being “defeated and frustrated by a set of long-faced sectarians, in the bare-floored rooms of an old Dean’s house” (7)—the young officer makes a deliberate choice, to do what he has thus far neglected: “He would look forward not back. He would concentrate on his career” (8).

Lt. Loewenhielm resembles the rich young man in Matthew 19, who asks an urgent question of Christ: “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” When Jesus tells him to keep the commandments, the young man says he has kept them, but still he feels he lacks something. Christ’s reply sounds simple, but as its words echo against one another, they explode and multiply: “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” Christ reveals to him the very highest standard, the way of perfection, which is what the rich young man has been demanding to know, but the knowledge plunges him into despair because he cannot bring himself to follow it. We are told that he “went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”

We never learn what becomes of Matthew’s rich young man, but Dinesen’s lieutenant reappears three decades later in Berlevaag, as a general in a scarlet uniform. He has indeed succeeded at his career: he has “cut a brilliant figure in a brilliant world”; in “high circles he [has] moved with grace and ease, pleased with

his surroundings and with himself” (8). He now returns to the house of his aunt, in search of “rest from his busy life at court” (31). Rest is what he cannot find, however, for an “absurd thing [has] lately been happening” to him:

he would find himself worrying about his immortal soul. Did he have any reason for doing so? He was a moral person, loyal to his king, his wife and his friends, an example to everybody. But there were moments when it seemed to him that the world was not a moral, but a mystic, concern. (32)

He totes up his successes and concludes that he has more than satisfied the ambitions of his youthful self: “it might be held that he had gained the whole world.” Then the older man “gravely, even bitterly” turns to his younger self and asks “in what he had profited? Somewhere something had been lost” (33).

It turns out that for three decades he has not been able to forget the spiritual truth he walked away from, though he has tried to diffuse and deny it. “Words and turns...from the dean’s house” have “stuck in his mind”—he benefitted from these in the court where “piety was now in fashion” (8). And he has been haunted by the vision of Martine’s face, which appears before him in the midst of his worldliest pleasures, over a splendid dinner at the Café Anglais as he makes a conquest of the woman across the table. We are told that when the successful athlete and courtier

and ladies' man glimpsed this vision, he "rejected it" (34).

Now the general rides to the dean's anniversary supper with one thing in mind: "He would let [his younger self] prove to him, once and for all, that thirty-one years ago, he had made the right choice. The low rooms, the haddock and glass of water on the table before him should be called in to bear evidence that in their milieu the existence of Lorens Loewenhielm would very soon have become sheer misery" (33). But the Holy Spirit has been busy, for a full three decades it seems, arranging an elaborate joke, at everyone's expense, for everyone's benefit: the general is headed for Babette's feast, where he will taste, not haddock and water, but the same cuisine he once ate at the Café Anglais. The food tonight will decidedly not bear witness against the faith he once rejected.

That night several miracles take place at this feast, and they cannot be separated from the celestial joke being played upon one and all, which amounts to this: their immediate expectations are overturned and their deepest longings are fulfilled. One miracle unfolds within the fastidious sensibilities of the general. Across from him sits Martine, whose face has aged physically but whose spiritual qualities have remained unchanged: "how serene was the forehead, how quietly trustful the eyes, how pure and sweet the mouth, as if no hasty word had ever passed its lips" (35). Then the general begins to eat and drink, and slowly abandons his former certainties:

"This is very strange! Amontillado. And the finest Amontillado that I have ever tasted." ... "This is exceedingly strange! For surely I am eating turtle-soup—and what turtle-soup!" ... "Incredible! It is Blinis Demidoff!" He looked round at his fellow-diners. They were all quietly eating their Blinis Demidoff, without any sign of either surprise or approval, as if they had been doing so every day for thirty years. (35-36)

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He is similarly amazed by a rare wine and by an "incredibly recherché and palatable" dish of quails he knows to be the invention of the chef at the Café Anglais, both of which he names aloud to a neighbor. By the time mounds of fresh fruit are served (it is December 15, and this feast takes place on a fjord that looks out toward the Arctic Circle), he "no longer wonder[s] at anything." The miraculous is the order of the day. Abandoning himself to the occasion, he laughs. To his neighbor he says gaily, "Beautiful grapes!" (39).

On the ride to dinner, he lays plans "to dominate the conversation round that same table where Lt. Loewenhielm sat mute." During the meal itself, he is too preoccupied by the miracle of the food to carry out his plans, but then emboldened by the wine, he arises to make a speech. And what first comes out of the general's mouth are the very phrases he heard at this table during his earlier visits: "Mercy and truth, my friends, have met together. Righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another." He, who is used to forming his speeches with care, now seems to be no more than "a mouthpiece for a message which meant to be brought forth" (40). This message turns out to be about divine grace. He has just discovered a truth, that grace is infinite. "Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude.... See! that which we have chosen is given us, and that which we have refused is, also and at the same time, granted us. Ay, that which we have rejected is poured upon us abundantly" (40).

Lt. Loewenhielm imagined that one choice excluded the other, that to reject for himself a

plain life such as the dean's flock lived meant to reject what was the essence of that life, their faith. He measured himself against their calling and found himself wanting. But he has not been able to rid himself of the words of their faith, which have been operating on him all these years, or of the image of goodness, Martine's face. As he leaves the dinner that night, he tells Martine: "I have been with you every day of my life....And I shall be with you every day that is left to me. Every evening I shall sit down, if not in the flesh, which means nothing, in spirit, which is all, to dine with you, just like tonight" (42). He has been granted a moment of vision, when for him the real world *is* the spiritual world, inseparable from the world of the flesh. He thought that he had rejected the mystic within himself, that he had embraced instead the practical and the physical. But words of faith and a vision of faith have been working within him until they cannot be separated from the life he in fact has led, the choice he made.

One thing remains ambiguous in the general's after-dinner speech, and in his leave-taking with Martine: the doctrinal content of his vision. We know that he has leapt free of one notion—that one's choice is *either* right *or* wrong, that one chooses *either* spirit *or* flesh. What has he leapt toward? During the mystical banquet when he consumed food that ravished his senses, did he make the leap of faith to embrace Jesus as the son of God and redeemer of the world? There can be no doubt that this is the cornerstone of the faith of the dean's childlike flock. Though the name of Jesus Christ is not once mentioned in the story, we are twice told that the dean is a follower of Martin Luther. And when Martine and Philippa sit down in

the parlor and solemnly commit themselves to God before a dinner in which they fear the devil has had a hand, they have armed themselves for spiritual battle by putting on "their confirmation gold crosses" (29). Their calling has been to follow Christ, and it is the radical demand as well as the absurdity of Christ's claim upon him that Lorens Loewenhielm has been fleeing and rejecting repeatedly. It seems that at the banquet the general comes to embrace what he has been fleeing.

This story ends happily for everyone, if we consider that all the principals are fulfilled in their vocations. Babette has been given leave to do her utmost and has taken it. Martine and Philippa, the good stewards, have seen their father's vision of love restored among his flock. The flock has seen "the fulfillment of an ever-present hope": they have "been given one hour of the millennium" (42). These are substantial and nourishing benefits, suitable for the unworldly folk who inhabit Berlevaag, but grace is large-handed and bestows much more. Everybody gets dessert. The sisters and the villagers, it seems, will not lose Babette after all, for she has left herself no lottery money for returning to Paris. And Babette's dessert? General Loewenhielm, the last-minute guest who brings the number of diners to twelve (surely a more resonant number than eleven), not only encounters grace for himself but acts as its agent. Unlike the other diners, he allows himself to *taste* the food and wine and can discern their excellence. He is not the only one the better for this. Babette the great artist is fulfilled, and she is also appreciated.