Malled in the court by the meal deal

We like to think of ourselves as living in a consumerist environment. Yet on any day there are more meals served in food courts of Hunt shopping centres than in the region’s fine restaurants and cafes. There are many interesting things about food courts. One is the food, which is simple, frugal and on sale. First, though, there are the security cameras. Why do food courts have so many? Why is every diner so watched? And who is sitting back there watching? Do mall eating have a problem with their table manners? Is chip theft on the rise? Do shoppers stop by the food court for a quick exit snack? The history of the design of the food court. The problem for the mall owner is that food courts are dead outside meal times. Mall planners put food courts out of the way, upstairs off the side, and so not waste prime retail space. Food courts are simple things: a big square with food outlets around the edges and as much eating space as possible crowded in the middle. The lighting is severe and constant, and there is no music, just the bustle of kitchen and eating noises and aggregated chatter. It’s business not recreational noise. Food courts contain none of the lavish fittings that you see elsewhere and aggregated chatter. It’s business not recreational noise. Food courts, by contrast, are basic. They are a one-on-one between food and digest tract, mediated by waists, fingers and mouths. They are the mall workers canteen. Their sales uniforms stand out. They watch the clock annihilate their break, listening to their iPods, texting, fuelling up. Fast food, fast eating. Mainly, though, food courts are for shoppers. Food courts prolong the time shoppers spend at a mall. You park, you shop, you get hungry; you eat, you shop some more. It’s surprising how many food court goers eat alone. Some exceptions are mums with strollered kids in the first stages of hot-chip addiction, older kids waggling school, and retired couples, the old bloke mulching a burger with falling teeth, looking aimlessly across the court wondering if, maybe, this is the most exciting part of his day, his wife pretending her carrot salat is delicious. But what she’d really love is a bucket of hot chips, especially if it came in a meal deal, like most dinners do. A meal deal is hamburger chips and a soft drink, with change for coffee out of 10 bucks. Or it’s the fried chicken value combo for the same price. Or the pizza, or the feta calzoni roll with mild sweet chilli sauce, and a drink. However, some diners go exotic. They tuck into wok fried noodles from a box, American sitcom style, with chopsticks. Or.nibble at a mixed sushi lunch box, or a burrito wrap. Or fuel up big time at the Asian oriental stall. Two selections plus rice and plastic cutlery for the same price as the chicken value combo next door. Then finish off with coffee and donuts, or a soft serve cone, like the kids, and the woman with the trolley. And sneer at the bloomed women in pyjamas and runners with their energy boost drinks with extra macro stuff. And enjoy your laminated surroundings as you pick your teeth, watching well-trained, obliging customers husk their scraps. See women dressed the way cafeteria workers in department stores used to dress, collecting piles of chicken bones (sucked clean) and empty chip cartons and armloads of wrapping paper and scrunchied serviettes, and watch them wipe, wipe, wipe the tables. See men in grey junior uniforms haul large plastic bags of scraps to a nether world. Watch other grey men mop the tiles, carefully positioning yellow “Warning wet floor” signs to recce their labour. See the food court continuously refreshed for hungry shoppers darting into pit lane, as your own campaign recommences.

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Putting faith in the incomprehensible

Jesus is magic for the moment, writes Daniel Dries.

I S U D D E N L Y find that I am entering into “theological” discussions with my four-year-old daughter. Bearing in mind that most of the people in my Sunday congregation are considerably more “mature” than four years old, I need to give some serious thought to the appropriate age for sharing the Christian faith with my own children. Somehow, the concepts and language that I picked up at theological college don’t seem quite appropriate for this purpose. Recognising this and I was discussing the meaning of Easter. My daughter explained the entire event to me by saying: “At Easter, the naughty people nailed Jesus to the Cross. He died, but he didn’t matter because he came back to life. Jesus is magic!”

My natural professional instinct was to say: “Jesus is not magic. The resurrection of Christ is both the pledge and the paradigm of the bodily resurrection of believers. Moreover, believers are now raised with Christ in that they share his victory over sin and his risen life…” It’s not difficult to imagine what sort of a response this would have elicited from a four-year-old girl. While the phrase “Jesus is magic” makes me rather uncomfortable, my daughter’s explanation of the resurrection probably reflects the early Christians’ response to the event much more accurately than my own.

In a world in which miracles don’t sit very well with people anymore, the trend is often to reduce Jesus to an admirable and inspiring moral teacher or life coach – a sort of first-century Oprah Winfrey or Dr Phil. The reality is that we cannot possibly rationalise or reconcile the resurrection with our modern understanding of science or human existence. However, there is no doubt that the person of Jesus Christ did things that absolutely amazed (and transformed the lives of first-century people. Although the institutional church has received some very bad press in recent times, it is also undeniable that Christ continues to do amazing things in the lives of countless thousands of believers. I have to admit to being just a little proud of my daughter’s explanation of the Easter message. I imagine that the majority of children her age would be quick to suggest the more primal concern with chocolate eggs delivered (quite inexplicably) by a fluffy white bunny. Any 21st century parent who wishes to share a Christian belief system with their children faces a significant challenge. Trying to combat the growing secularisation of festivals such as Christmas and Easter, without squelching the fun out of them, is far from easy.

For the time being, I plan to go along with the “Jesus is magic” theology. In time to come, this will translate into “Jesus can do anything” helping young people to accept that there is something amazing or incomprehensible in the person of Jesus Christ is the crucial first step towards a life of faith.

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