

Journey into Taste

Week 5: 29 March 2009

Theme of the Week

Taste teaches us about God's desire to take care of us



STARTING OUT

Taste and See!

Without nourishment our bodies cannot survive. We must eat and drink or we cannot function properly. The senses of smell and taste are linked together in the way we appreciate food and taste becomes the sense we use to discriminate how we feed ourselves. We need to put good things into our bodies to help them grow and flourish and the sense of taste will tell us whether what we are eating is good for us or not. We tend not to like bitter or intensely sour tastes as much as we like sweet tasting food. This is not surprising when many poisonous or decaying foods taste bitter or sour, but sugar-rich foods which can give energy are sweet.

Eating food and being fed is powerfully related in scripture to the idea of God's loving care of us. Because God is the creator of all, God wants us to grow and flourish, both physically, mentally and spiritually. So in the book of Genesis, when God creates human beings, he makes sure that there are plenty of things for them to eat. When Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the forbidden tree, it was not because they were hungry. They did not need to eat it at all. God had met all their needs, but still they wanted more. When the Israelites are starving in the desert, they are provided with manna by God. Divine hospitality and care is a feature of the people of Israel's relationship with God and is mirrored in a requirement to welcome and feed visitors and strangers passing by. Salvation then, is not just a purely spiritual matter, it requires making sure that the people are fed.

It is not surprising then, that scripture makes an analogy in several places between sweet tasting food and the word of God. We need to be fed spiritually too, because we also have to grow spiritually. God's word is sweet like honey; we can 'taste' God in worship. And Jesus comes to us in the Eucharist when we eat and drink bread and wine. It is not

**The strip of red flesh
lies still, absorbs, silent; speaks
to all the body**

Archbishop Rowan Williams

Poem by kind permission of the Archbishop of Canterbury; © Rowan Williams 2009





surprising then that Jesus made the connection for his disciples between his physical body and a spiritual form of eating and drinking, when he said in the desert that human beings do not live by bread alone but by the Word of God.

Activity

Make a list of all your favourite foods, or your favourite meal. What do you most enjoy eating and what do you most enjoy about eating? Think about what makes it your favourite.

Make a list of any spiritual 'foods' you enjoy. It might be a particular church service, prayer time, or time of the year, favourite parts of scripture, music, being with others in a fellowship group, or going on a long walk by yourself. How do these activities 'feed' you?

Next time you eat your favourite foods or enjoy your spiritual nourishment, reflect on all those who make it possible for you to have it and give thanks for that provision.

GOING DEEPER

Thinking about being unable to taste

A story

Samuel sits on the floor of his hut. He can no longer get up and soon he will not be able to sit up either. He has been brought food and clean water by his family who have walked for a long time to a feeding station to get it. But Samuel can neither eat the food nor even drink much of the water. His tongue is swollen and his mouth too sore to endure eating. He, like many people he knows and has known, has AIDS. He is twenty-five. He will soon die and his family knows it, but they still bring him food and drink, the basics of human care.

We all know what it is like to lose our appetites when we are feeling unwell, and sometimes, when we are ill, even the sight or smell of food can make us feel worse. If our pets start to refuse food, even if they are outwardly fine, we know there is something wrong and should call the vet. Similarly, people who are close to death from illness usually stop eating. They don't need the food any more and this can be a sign to hospital or hospice staff and the person's family that the end is near.

So food is intimately connected with health and wellbeing, with life itself. This means that those very many like Samuel, who are caught up in the AIDs pandemic are being denied life. The gift of taste tells us that we are alive and going about the business of living.





Perhaps we should not let the familiarity of eating and drinking make us complacent and perhaps we should not forget what a gift being able to taste really is.

Some questions to think about:

- What kinds of food are typically offered to sick people who have lost their appetites?
- How would you tempt a sick person to eat?
- How would you feel if a person said they could not eat food you had prepared for them?
- What do you think a God's eye view of Samuel's situation might be?

MOVING ON

Seeing Scripture differently

Mark 14:12-28 (The Last Supper)

On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, 'Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?' So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, "The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?" He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.' So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

When it was evening, he came with the twelve. And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.' They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, 'Surely, not I?' He said to them, 'It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me. For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.'

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.'



When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. And Jesus said to them, 'You will all become deserters; for it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered." But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.'



Communion by Hans Schüpfelin

(part of a collection of reproductions compiled by The Yorck Project)

Activity

Find out all you can about the practice of the Jewish Passover and the reasons for the foods that are used, and in particular the way they taste. This helps us understand what Jesus and his disciples did at the Last Supper. Jewish people ask 'the four questions' to focus attention on what they are doing at the meal and why they eat and drink the things they do. The answers to the questions draw them back to their history and God's salvation for his chosen people.

Here are some questions for us to think about:

- Why does the bread have to be unleavened?
- Why does the lamb have to be roasted and eaten in a particular way?





- Why do the herbs have to taste bitter?
- Why does the wine have to be drunk?
- How does the Passover make connections between food and drink, salvation and thanksgiving?



To find out more about Passover you can look at:
www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism/holydays/passover_1.shtml

Jewish people celebrating Passover ask the question “why is this night different from all other nights?” How would we, as Christians, answer that question about the Last Supper?

MOVING INTO LENT

Fasting in the desert

The accounts of Jesus’ time in the desert in the gospels of Matthew and Luke agree that Jesus performed a fast while he was there. ‘He fasted forty days and forty nights; and afterwards he was famished’ (Matthew 4.2); ‘He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over he was famished’ (Luke 4.2).

Fasting for Jews was a typical religious practice, but for Jesus the refusal to taste food was likely to have been deeply bound up in his determination to undertake God’s ministry and mission. Jesus, steeped in the scriptures, would have known very well a passage in Isaiah 58 where the prophet asks whether the people of Israel actually think about why they fast. There is absolutely no point in fasting, says Isaiah, if it doesn’t challenge you mentally and spiritually as well as physically.

The outcome of fasting should be to understand more clearly what God wants of us, and its outcome should be mercy and justice. If you think more carefully about what you are going to eat, then you should realise more clearly that doing God’s will means feeding hungry people and trying to make a world where hunger is no more. The passage in Isaiah is particularly significant because he says the outcome of fasting will be to feed the hungry, help the poor and cover the naked. Doing this brings a person into a right relationship with God.

This, of course, is precisely what Jesus suggested his followers needed to do to come into God’s presence, so those prophetic words of Isaiah were etched into his ministry. Furthermore, we can see the time spent in the desert as a time of creative decision and complete obedience to God which has outworking throughout Jesus’ ministry.

Suppose then, we see the feeding miracles of Jesus as a response to what he learned when he was fasting: hungry people need to be fed. When he heals Jairus’ daughter, he tells her





Judean Desert

parents she needs to be fed. After his resurrection, what do the disciples see Jesus doing – preparing food for them. So the experience of not being able to taste food may have made Jesus especially attentive to people's physical needs. He knew what it was like to be hungry and made sure others were not.

It is not surprising then, that both at the Last Supper and in commissioning his disciples (which includes us) he used the language of feeding, eating and drinking. When we celebrate and take part in the Eucharist, we should hear the echoes of Jesus' time in the desert when he had no food at all, but at the end of the time of fasting came into close relationship with God knowing that he was obedient to his will.

Activity

Fasting in Christian tradition is about more than just going without chocolate or giving up something we enjoy. It can be about focussing attention on the food and drink we normally take for granted and thinking about where it comes from and who makes it possible for us to have it. It can also be about trying to give something back to those who do not have as much as we do, so in some churches a 'family fast day' will be about having a little less and giving the saved money to a charitable cause. For other Christians, fasting means a more holistic spiritual discipline, so as to become more open to the Father's will.





Choose one of these activities:

- When you next prepare a meal, find out where the ingredients came from and about the people who most likely prepared it. What are their lives like? Are the foods fairly traded? Spend some time giving thanks for those people and find out a little more about Fair Trade.
- Plan a day in which you eat or drink a little less than usual (do not do this if it is not medically advisable). Find out about agencies which try to provide clean water and food to people suffering from famine. Could you support one of those agencies or spend more time praying for the work they do?
- Say the Lord's prayer quietly, concentrating on letting go of anxieties and ambitions. What might God be saying to you?

RESTING ON THE WAY

Prayer and reflection

1 Peter 2.1-3

Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. ²Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation — ³if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.





Blessed are you Lord, God of all Creation
through your goodness we have this bread to offer
which earth has given and human hands have made
it will become for us the bread of life.

Blessed are you Lord, God of all Creation
through your goodness we have this wine to offer
fruit of the vine and work of human hands
it will become our spiritual drink

*Come and partake the gospel feast,
Be saved from sin, in Jesus rest;
O taste the goodness of our God,
and eat his flesh and drink his blood*

Charles Wesley

Where else can this journey take me?

There is more material to explore in *Sense Making Faith* in the 'Journey into Tasting' chapter and you can explore further journeys and ideas in the Explore section of www.spiritualjourneys.org.uk in the section called 'Taste'.

Passover resources:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism/holydays/passover_1.shtml

David Spriggs, *Feasting on God's Word*, Bible Reading Fellowship 2003

David Ford, *The Shape of Living*, Fount (HarperCollins) 1997 chapter 7 on feasting

Geoffrey Duncan (ed), *Harvest for the World*, compiled for Christian Aid and Cafod, Canterbury Press, 2nd edition 2004

John Diamond, 'C', Vermilion 1998

The Daily Service on Radio 4 from March 30th to April 2nd offers more readings and reflections for you to listen to about how the spiritual journey is affected by the experience of taste.

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