

Feast or Famine: Contemplating food during Lent

Have you ever realised how often food is mentioned in the Bible?

- Right at the start of Genesis we have Adam and Eve eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
- Later, we see Abraham and Sarah providing food for three strange visitors.
- Jacob makes a stew in order to gain his father's favour.
- Joseph's brothers come to Egypt to buy food because a famine has struck the land.
- Before they leave Egypt, the Israelites make unleavened bread.
- God provides quail and manna for his people as they journey through the wilderness.
- Joshua and the other spies find luscious looking fruit in Canaan.
- Ruth collects leftover barley from Boaz's field.
- David takes food to his brothers before the battle against Goliath.
- Elijah asks the widow of Zarephath to share some bread with him.
- Daniel and his friends refuse to eat what is served to them from the King's table.
- Esther asks her husband - the King - to hold a dinner party for her.
- Jesus feeds a multitude with 5 loaves of bread and a couple of fish.
- Martha bakes cakes when Jesus comes to visit her and her sister Mary.
- The father has the fatted calf roasted when his prodigal son comes home.
- Jesus broke bread and drank wine with his disciples on the night he was arrested.
- He broke bread again with Cleopas after walking along the Emmaus road.
- The disciples were invited to breakfast with Jesus on the beach...

... and of course, there are many other examples as well.

As I write this, we find ourselves just a few days into the season of Lent. Many of us will have celebrated Shrove Tuesday by feasting on pancakes and the gospel reading in the lectionary for the first Sunday of Lent is the familiar story of Jesus going into the wilderness and eating nothing for 40 days.

In Matthew's account of this event, we read these words: "After fasting forty days and forty nights, Jesus was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.' Jesus answered, 'It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

It is worth pointing out that Jesus here isn't saying we can live without food; only that we need God's word as well as food.

It is, of course, from what happened with Jesus in the wilderness that we get the tradition of 'giving something up for Lent', but I wonder, this year, is denying ourselves and 'giving something up' such a good idea?

Last March we went into lockdown for the first time. This came part way through the Lent. And it sort of feels like we've never really left the season of Lent since.

The last 12 months have been a time of great relational sacrifice brought about through our shared discipline of social distancing to fight the pandemic. So, is more sacrifice, more giving up, the best thing for us to do during Lent this year?

Perhaps, instead of giving up cake, or biscuits, or whatever else, we might instead think a little bit more carefully about our relationship with food during Lent this year.

Because I wonder what comes to your mind when you think of food? Do you picture a table laid with delicious food, like at Christmas? Or maybe tempting cakes that you know you should resist? Or do you see food as a fuel that simply has to be eaten in order to get on with everything else you need to do? Is food a pleasure to be savoured, or a daily routine to be undertaken?

How we view the food we eat - what we see it as being - impacts our whole attitude towards it: whether we approach it with nurture and care, or thoughtlessly and neglectfully.

To add another example to our list from earlier, the first chapter of Genesis reminds us that food is part of Gods creation, which he pronounced as being very, very good! More than that, it reminds us that food is actually a gift from God.

So perhaps during Lent this year, we might want to reconsider our relationship with food, remembering that it is a gift from God.

Perhaps we might think about eating more seasonal, locally grown produce instead of eating asparagus in February that has been flown in from Peru. Perhaps we might try and buy more food that is Fair Trade. Perhaps we might decide to go 'meat free' one day a week. Perhaps we might try and be a bit less wasteful with the food we eat. Perhaps we might try and do more home cooking rather than eating pre-packaged, processed food from the supermarket.

We might also want to spend some time thinking about those who have far less to eat than we do.

We live in a world in which there is enough food to feed everyone, and yet 11% of women, men and children go to bed hungry every night. At the same time, around 650 million adults worldwide are obese, and 40 million children under the age of five are overweight.

Of course, those going to bed hungry don't just live in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, some of them live far closer to home; in the towns and villages where we live.

What might we do - as individuals and as the church - to change this?

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