

An Appetite for Advent – Advent 2019

Malachi 3 vv 1-4 p961, Benedictus, Philippians 1 vv 1-11 p1178, Luke 3 vv 1-6 p1029

For much of human history, the fear has been that there will be too little food for people to eat and for their families to live and thrive. This is still true in much of the world today. We, however, are confronted by an abundance of things to eat and obesity has become a major public health issue. We are warned that we may be digging our graves with our teeth. Eating is enjoyable. Food is relatively cheap compared with what it used to be as a proportion of our incomes. There is a wide variety of foodstuffs on sale. There are no food shortages. And eating is a highly enjoyable activity. So the temptation is always there to eat too much. There are hungry people in twenty-first century Britain, but that is a problem of distribution rather than of any real shortage of food. How do we get food to hungry people, the poorest in our society? Foodbanks, decent wages, a fair benefit system, education, help with addictions which may cause people to prioritise alcohol or other drugs over nutrition.

For most of us, however, the problem is the opposite one. It is only too easy to eat too much. This worries the medical profession because being overweight makes us more likely to contract a number of diseases and makes it harder to treat other conditions we might develop. It is also an issue of image. In our culture, we associate being beautiful with being slender. People worry that, if they are too fat, they are unattractive and this tips over into a minority developing conditions such as anorexia and bulimia. People talk about fat shaming. And yet food tastes too good. It is hard to resist a nice cake or a plate of biscuits or a good meal.

We do, after all, need food. We shouldn't last long if we stopped eating, though some of us might last longer than others. We have to eat to live. It is only too easy to switch that round so that, instead of eating to live, we live to eat. I can quite understand the temptation to eat too much and to eat the wrong things.

Part of the problem is that in our every day lives we burn far fewer calories than our ancestors did. We don't walk or run to get to where we've got to go. Machines do the work people used to do. We don't even have to get out of our chairs to change the channel on the TV. For many people, exercise has become a leisure activity, something to be fitted into a busy schedule, rather than a natural part of life. I remember the young woman who told me that she needed a lift from the station each day so that she would have time to go to the gym. Only, I don't think she went to the gym very much, whereas she could have walked from the station every day if she'd been so minded. In this respect, I suppose, exercise for many people is like prayer or worship, no longer an essential part of life, but a leisure activity to be fitted in when you've done all the important things.

Actually, we need to eat less than our ancestors did, perhaps less than we did ourselves when we walked to and from school or work, played sport, cut the grass with a push mower and employed a broom rather than a leaf blower to clear the path. Yet, food still tastes as good as it did when we came in from a hard day digging the vegetable plot. We've probably also retained the instinct, left over from when people weren't sure where the next meal was coming from, to eat when we get the chance, rather than risk going without altogether. Nutritionists talk about empty calories – food which supplies calories we don't need and very little else that we do need. A good example would be sugary drinks. Their only real nutritional content is the sugar which mostly we don't need, but will attack our teeth on the

way down, increase our risk of diabetes by raising our blood glucose levels, and quite likely be metabolised into fat to clog our arteries and to put additional strain on our joints, making it less likely that we will exercise.

What's all this got to do with Advent? Well, one thing it has to do with Advent is that this is a challenging time for people on diets. There is a great deal of temptation around. Actually, a traditional Christmas dinner is a well-balanced nourishing meal, consisting of a fairly lean meat and plenty of vegetables. You needn't worry that it will ruin your diet so long as you watch the size of the portions you eat. You can surely afford one day on which you have a nice pudding and a selection of sweets and cheeses. The challenge is that many of us will eat several Christmas dinners at this time of year as well as going to lots of parties (some of you, not all of us) and then there is eating up the leftovers well into the New Year. So we shall be eating things which are good for us to eat. Many of us will be eating them in the company of people whom we love, which is another good thing about eating. Food isn't just fuel. On the other hand, we shall very likely eat too much of the good things and additionally ingest a fair amount of empty calories.

But you didn't come to church for nutritional advice. So, why am I talking about food from the pulpit? Some people fast in Advent. Fr Dobromir told us that his Bulgarian Church take the Advent fast very seriously. We know that we need to eat when we are hungry. Food is much more satisfying if we eat when we are hungry, when we have a genuine, healthy appetite for it. Medical practitioners say that some obese people, when they finally agree to diet, think that they may be ill, because they are getting pangs they don't recognise. They've actually forgotten what it is to be hungry and for years have just been eating for eating's sake.

I'm not really primarily concerned about food, however, this morning. My concern is that our Christmas worship can be corrupted in the same way as our Christmas dinner. Ideally we eat, because we are hungry. We eat in order to grow and so that our bodies can renew themselves, ourselves! We eat in order to replace the calories we have consumed in performing our daily tasks. We eat in order to remain fit and healthy so that we can continue to live as useful members of society, carrying out our duties to the glory of God and for the benefit of other people. Hopefully, we enjoy our food and the company in which we eat it. But, ideally, we don't just eat to titillate our taste buds, indulging our selfish appetites and possibly undermining our health so that, in the long run, we are less happy as human beings and less useful to other people.

Likewise celebrating the Christmas story. Jesus meets our actual needs. We need a Saviour and a Redeemer. In Christ, we are renewed. Our sins are forgiven. We are replenished. What is lacking from the past is made good. What is required for the future is supplied. We are made whole. We are, in the words of the Benedictus, *delivered out of the hands of our enemies* (sin, the world and the devil) [that] *we might serve him without fear*. Jesus, the Bread of life, is the nutrition we actually need. Nourished by Jesus, we are empowered to do the work He has prepared for us to do in the world.

Advent can seem a bit grim. Not only do some Christians fast, the liturgical colour is purple, the same as for Lent. We don't sing the *Gloria*. The theme is the four Last Things - Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell. Advent is about the coming of Jesus. He comes as Judge. The world cries out for justice, but justice is a two-edged sword. We get what we deserve, vindication for the victims, punishment for the perpetrators. There are these four Last Things - Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell – to meditate on and to prepare for. If we understand our need for God, we are hungry for a Saviour and a Redeemer. Our appetite is sharp and it can only be satisfied by Jesus, the Bread of Life. In the coming of Jesus, we acclaim God as our Judge, the God of perfect justice, and as our Saviour, a just God and a Saviour. God's mercy is indivisible from His justice because He is love. Here is the meaning of Christmas – our absolute need for God, His completely meeting our absolute need in His own Son. Nourished by Jesus, the Bread of Life, our sins are forgiven, the past is repaired, now we are made whole, for the future we are prepared.

There is a danger that, if we allow Advent with its theme of the four Last Things - Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell – to be swallowed up in anticipation of Christmas, we find ourselves celebrating the Birth of the Saviour and Redeemer without considering what we need to be saved and redeemed from. We aren't hungry for Jesus. We have no real appetite. Christmas worship can be diminished in the same way as Christmas dinner may be diminished, doing what we enjoy, but for no deeper reason. The Christmas story can seem like a fairy story if we lose the sense of why the Birth of Jesus was necessary for the salvation and redemption of the world. It may even be that we ingest the equivalent of empty calories as the specifically Christian elements of the Christmas celebration are downgraded so that we can enjoy the warm glow of carols and familiar readings without considering what they truly mean and the fundamental difference that their meaning makes to the entire lives of those who believe and to the final destiny of the whole of Creation.

Christmas is a very satisfying feast. The Gospel satisfies our every need. But, just as our mothers told us not to spoil our tea by eating too many sweets and biscuits beforehand, we need to keep our appetite sharp for Jesus by remembering why we need Him and to eat up everything which is on the plate at our Christmas celebrations.