

Do You Live to Eat? Ash Wednesday 2013

Joel 2 vv 1-17 p912, Ps 51, II Corinthians 5v20 – 6 v10 p1161, Matthew 6 vv 1-21 p970

Thinking about the Church's invitation to fast for forty days made me think of a favourite saying of my grandmother, *Do you eat to live or do you live to eat?* It's a good question. St Paul says, *For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain that we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content.* Food is fuel which enables our bodies to stay alive and gives them the power to do our duties. You use something like 1,000 Cal per day just to stay alive and the extra calories you consume are employed in getting about and doing physical work. The working brain doesn't consume any more calories than the resting brain. So thinking won't make you slimmer. And if you eat too many calories, they will be stored by your body as glucose, glycogen and fat. Hence the obesity epidemic.

Do you eat to live or do you live to eat? It would be a shame, however, to see food only as fuel. Those 1950s predictions of a future in which we wouldn't eat food but get all the nourishment we needed from taking tablets never seemed very appealing. The taste and texture of the food we ingest are very satisfying. Eating meals with people is an extremely important part of our family and social life. Eating is not an end in itself. Eating is a means to various ends – staying alive, fuel for the things we have to do, the sheer physical pleasure eating affords us and the love we share when we eat together. Means and ends is the real point of tonight's sermon. What do we live for and what do we need in order to live?

If eating becomes an end in itself, we are on the road to obesity or to anorexia, the apparently opposite medical condition consequent on an obsession with food and diet. Another one of my grandmother's sayings was, *He's digging his own grave with his teeth.* I think this saying and the other one *Do you eat to live or do you live to eat?* were deployed by an increasingly frail old lady with a declining appetite and a limited budget when contemplating the food consumption of a growing lad and his capacity to eat anyone *out of house and home!* However, basically, she was right. *Moderation in all things*, to quote an even more venerable authority, the Roman poet Terrence.

Do you eat to live or do you live to eat? What about money? Do you live to acquire money? Or do you acquire money in order to live? The miser comes to see money as an end in itself. Most of us, I hope, see money as a means to various ends. Money enables us to live and to support our families. It enables us to buy various goods and services we enjoy. Having money enables us to do good in the world, to support our local Church, to give to charity, to help individuals directly. Having enough money acquired honestly takes away at least some of the temptation to steal or to defraud and removes the shame of having to beg. Most, people, however, have to spend a large proportion of their time and energy on earning enough money to live on. There is always the risk that the effort to obtain the money which we need to live takes over our lives. How much is enough? Why do bankers on million pound annual salaries need million pound bonuses? What do they spend all that money on and how do they find the time? How much is enough? About £5,000 per annum more than we actually get would be most people's honest answer. Jesus said, *Blessed be ye poor.*

This brings us nicely on to career. Do we live to work or do we work to live? I think that might depend on the sort of person you are and the job you do. If you can see that the job you do is a real benefit to other people (shop worker, bus driver, teacher, doctor, artist, actor, farmer, fisherman, etc..) you might well feel that one of the reasons you are alive is in order to do your job. You might have such a sense of vocation that you would do your job anyway even if you weren't paid for it, supposing you could afford to live without paid employment. But if you can't see that the work for which you are paid has any intrinsic value or is of any use to anyone, you might think that your job is nothing more than a means to an end, the means by which you acquire the money you need to live. For most people, I guess, it is neither wholly one thing nor the other. We work because we need to earn a living but we also think that what we do in our work has value in itself. It is worth doing for its own sake, for the benefit it affords other people, as well as being worth doing for the wage or salary. If we feel that we are paid wages for doing something that is not worthwhile in itself or if we live on benefits and have no other reason for living than work, then we may feel useless, that we are drones, and thinking like that can drive some people to suicide. It is vitally important not to define the worth of a human being solely in terms of his or her paid employment. I strongly dislike the term *human resources* instead of *personnel* and I say that as the son of a personnel officer who treated his job as a vocation, though he himself would not have put it that way. Human beings have intrinsic value. We matter for what we are before we matter for what we do.

We could go on to consider position as well as money. Do you want to be prime minister as a means to making Britain a better place or is being prime minister an end in itself? What about your leisure activities? Do sports and pastimes and hobbies such as gardening or stamp collecting, enhance your life or do they become obsessions which take over your life?

Fire is a good servant, but a bad master was another of my grandmother's sayings. If you are in control, you can use fire to keep warm, to cook your dinner, to power an engine or to smelt steel. If the fire is in control it can burn your house down. There are many things like fire – appetite, desire, ambition, taking pleasure in the good things of life – which make good servants but bad masters. It is good to enjoy your food, to fall in love, to do your best to get on in the world, to enjoy the blessings God has given you, so long as you, under God, are in control of your life. But if your life is controlled by greed and lust, avarice, sloth and the like, you are on the road to perdition. If our lives are dominated by selfish desires, then paradoxically our selves are in peril. The paradox is that a life in which means becomes ends, in which our motivations to service are distorted into lusts that master, is no life at all. *The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.* With its invitation to self denial and self examination, Lent presents us with an opportunity to think again about what it's all about. *Do you eat to live or do you live to eat?*

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.