

Trinity 16 2011- Eat Up Your Greens

Isaiah 25 vv 1-9 p708, Psalm 23, Philippians 4 vv 1-9 p1180, Matthew 22 vv 1-14 p990

Last Saturday I attended a lecture on Christian Formation. What that means is how we are formed or reformed into being better Christians or, rather, how we become what we are. St Paul tells us to *be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind*. He tells us that, as Christians, *we have the mind of Christ*. He exhorts us, *Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus*.

I shared some of this with some of you at the Harvest Songs of Praise service last Sunday evening. Jeremy Worthen, the speaker on Saturday, pointed out the importance of memory in the formation of our personalities. We have become the people we are through what we have experienced, through what we have learnt and by how we remember. We were born with a particular set of genes and the people we are, our characters or personalities, are very much the result of the interaction of our genetic inheritance with our experience of life. As Christians we have been born again. What we are and what we become depends on the interaction of our inheritance and our experiences and, of course above all, on the grace of God. What we remember and how we remember is a very significant determinant of our personality.

Jeremy spoke about the importance of remembering in the Bible. Time and time again, the people of Israel are told to remember, to remember what God has done for them and to remember God's holy Law. There is a virtuous circle of being commanded to remember and of remembering to obey God's commandments. Remember God's promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and to David. Remember how God set you free from slavery in Egypt and brought you through the Red Sea. Remember how He fed you with manna in the Wilderness for forty years. Remember how He brought you into the Promised Land. Remember His commandments. *Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy*. Remember and teach your children. Teach your children from generation to generation. These Bible stories show you Who God is. They show you who you are. He is your God and you are His people. They remind you how much God loves you and of all the ways in which He shows His love for you. They remind you of the consequences of disobeying Him. They reassure you of His steadfast love, no matter what. Remembering the Bible story is not a history lesson. It is about who we are as a people – the people of God, members of one another and members of Christ. Each generation of Israelites recognises itself as the people whom God delivered from Egyptian slavery. Every generation is responsible for teaching its children, for inducting subsequent generations into the covenant. Sacred history is true for every generation of God's people. Remember what God has done for you and pass it on.

The words of the שמע – *Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God is one LORD, And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, with all thy soul and with all thy might* - are recited daily. They are taught to the children of every generation. They are fixed onto their head gear and written on their door posts. Remember.

Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy. The weekly day of rest reminds God's people that they are His people. They can rest one day in seven because they know that they can

rely on the LORD to provide. The Sabbath is a matter of our identity as the people of God, the people who have faith in Him.

Three times a year, the Jews went up to Jerusalem. At the Feast of Passover they remembered the Exodus. At the Feast of First Fruits or Pentecost, they remembered their dependence on God for everything they had. On the Day of Atonement, they remembered their sins, God's Justice and His mercy. As the chief rabbi said last Wednesday, on the Day of Atonement, Jews ask themselves how they would wish to be remembered. Then there is the Feast of Tabernacles, when they celebrate the ingathering of the Harvest, dwell in tents to remember the 40 years they spent wandering in the wilderness, re-read the Law out loud and in public and anticipate the coming of God's Kingdom. Remember.

Apart from the Day of Atonement, these are all feast days. Sacrifice and feasting is sharing a communal meal, a meal shared with family and with neighbours and friends, a meal shared with the poor and with the ministers of religion, a common meal shared with God Himself.

The food is received with thanksgiving. We bless God for it, which means that we bless the food. If we regard the food as a blessing, we must share it with one another, especially with the hungry. We bless the animals that provide our meat, which means keeping them decently while they are alive and killing them humanely when the time comes. We bless the earth our food comes from and therefore refrain from exploiting or despoiling it with overproduction or pollution.

Sometimes we note cynically that special church services are much better attended when there is food, but maybe we ought not to be so cynical. Food is deeply significant as the source of our well-being, our nourishment and our friendships, our relationships with one another and our relationship with God. Food is always in a sense potentially sacramental, *an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace*.

The Christian Church was a new beginning for the people of God, but the principles remained. Remember. Remember what God has done for you. Remember who you are. Remember what you ought to be. The Church created a new ritual for remembering, for teaching the faith and for remembering. The Sabbath was moved to Sunday, a weekly remembrance of the Resurrection. Easter, Whitsun and Christmas replaced Passover, First Fruits and Tabernacles. There was no more animal or other food sacrifice. Christ was *a full, perfect and sufficient, sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world*. What Jesus said, however, was *Do this in remembrance of me*. We break bread and share wine together in order to remember Jesus and all that He has done for us, to participate in His Body, to be assured of our eternal inheritance, both to signify and to effect our communion with Him and with one another (members of Christ and members of one another) and to proclaim His Death until He comes again – and we do this in the context of Eucharist, which is Greek for *thanksgiving* or *blessing*. St Paul says, *The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread*.

If Holy Communion were merely a memorial service for a good man who died 2,000 years ago, it wouldn't be surprising that so many people can't be bothered with it every week, but given that remembering the Cross and Resurrection equals participating in His Death and in the eternal Easter of Heaven, the Eucharist is the very essence of what it means to be a Christian, of what it means for the Church to be the Church.

Jeremy pointed out that, from the earliest times onwards, the Christian Church established a daily, weekly and yearly ritual of remembering which has persisted down to the present time. There was to be daily Bible reading and prayer, if possible together with other Christians, if not then alone. The whole Church was to meet every Sunday to participate in the Holy Communion. Reading the Bible reminds us Christians of who we are, of who God is, of what God has done for us and of what God wills for us. Bible reading leads to meditation on the nature of God and humanity and on the reality of the world. Meditation leads to prayer. And prayers leads to contemplation – contemplation being a deep awareness of the loving presence of God, a very real foretaste of heaven.

And yet, Jeremy sadly pointed out, this ritual of remembering which has served the people of God so well over thousands of years suddenly seems to have collapsed in the course of the last three or four decades. Most Christians don't see the need to go to Church every Sunday. Jeremy suspected that many don't read the Bible and pray every day. Most Christians certainly don't meet together daily for prayer. We haven't taught our children. The Christian story seems to be in danger of being forgotten. We don't know Who God is. We don't know who we are. We are no longer members of one another and our membership of Christ is pretty tenuous. Ritually remembering at feasts which reflect the seasons is rapidly becoming a thing of the past.

Yet the Church continues to offer daily Morning and Evening Prayer and Holy Communion on Sundays and other festivals, the liturgical year revolving around Easter and Christmas, but very few people take her up on her offer. Bibles are freely available but languish on bookshelves. We offer Sunday Schools and weekday activities for children, but our children play sport or go shopping or catch up on their homework. I suggested to Jeremy that it is as if we were offering a tasty and nutritious meal to people and they just didn't want to know. Even Christians seem to be indifferent to the Church's rich banquet, our heritage, our remembrance of what God has done for us, of who we are and of what He is and of what He has prepared for those who love Him. Jeremy pointed out quite rightly that we can't force feed people with top quality meat and fresh vegetables if they'd prefer to stuff themselves with chips!

Up there with religion and family as the source of social cohesion is the shared meal. I've been reading a lot about food recently and our potentially toxic relationship with it. Think about that shared meal for a moment, maybe a family meal or a meal when you've asked a few friends in to dinner, or maybe a more formal occasion, perhaps a business dinner. For a start, the critics would say, there is likely to be far too much on the table and it has been come by far too easily. We don't have to be thankful for it. We aren't likely to go short of food. So we forget to bless God and we forget to bless the food. Without thinking we live in

a world where too many people are obese and too many people are starving. TV programmes and magazine articles about food are so lascivious that they have been described as food pornography, while too many of us are unable or too lazy to cook and get fat on takeaways and microwaveable TV dinners. In the past, feast days were balanced by fast days. People deliberately abstained from certain foods for about half the year for the good of their own souls and bodies. Nowadays time is homogenised. We never go without if we can help it and so times of plenty are nothing special. Christmas swallows up Advent and then we all complain that Christmas is too much about greed and materialism. We ought to have prepared for the feast by fasting and praying.

The critics would also complain that there is too much meat on our tables. It isn't natural to eat as much meat as we do and our digestive systems struggle to cope. Factory farming gives us an abundance of cheap meat, but often at the expense of animal welfare. Too much livestock devours food which could have been used to feed human beings and creates massive environmental pollution.

They would criticise our tables further for the amount of out of season and foreign produce we tuck in to. We burn fuel to heat greenhouses or to transport food across the globe because we must have what we want when we want it. We no longer live with the rhythms of nature. We miss out on going without. We waste oil and recklessly grow our carbon footprints.

It is not at all unlikely that at many meals there will be children and some adults who express their individuality by insisting that they can't or won't eat what everybody else is having. They may make difficulties for the cook and embarrass the other guests, but perhaps that is just the point. They have asserted their personal rights against the family, against the community and against society as a whole.

Others at table maybe telephoning or texting people who are not in the room, ignoring the people with whom they are actually eating. They will choose the people they talk to. They don't feel obliged to be polite to the people who happen to be sharing their space.

In reality, of course, many families seldom sit down to meals together at all. Given the demands of work, school and social life, they are all in and out of the house at different times and everybody grabs a bite as he or she passes the kitchen. There is no time to sit down together, still less to prepare a proper meal.

All this being so – that people are extremely busy, self-absorbed and materialistic – what should we do about religion? Is Church as outmoded as the family meal?

It would be easy to conclude that organised religion has had its day. There is very little room for Church in the modern world, even if people still cultivate their own personal spiritualities. Maybe we should just give up. We could hand our historic buildings over to English Heritage. Maybe some of them could become like Dode Church, run as commercial ventures, providing services such as weddings for paying customers. We might be able to

hang on to a few disused churches where nostalgic enthusiasts could run services for tourists in much the same way as some people (including many clergy!) run steam trains on old railway lines. Perhaps the Church of England needs a Dr Richard Beeching. We could perhaps concentrate more effectively on our charitable works and on engaging meaningfully with society if we abandoned most of our historic baggage of public worship, ancient books and out of date thinking.

Then again, we might decide that we should carry on and that, in order to do so, we must adapt the Church so that it suits the modern world. Treat people as consumers. Find out what they want and provide it for them. Play down commitment. Drop unfashionable teaching and practice. Aim to entertain rather than to inspire. Never give people the chance to feel bored or got at. Dumb down till we hit the lowest common denominator. If we give people what they want, maybe they will reciprocate by giving us just enough support to enable us to survive. Maybe this is the only way that the Church can survive in an individualistic, materialistic, consumer oriented society. A couple of years ago I heard on Radio 4 about a plan to get children to eat their vegetables by coating them with chocolate. Imagine. Broccoli and carrots covered in chocolate. I've not heard the results of the experiment. I think if it had been a big success I would have. Adapting the Church to make it acceptable to people who are indifferent to God sounds to me about as likely to succeed as dipping broccoli in chocolate.

Then again, we could carry on offering the rich banquet which God has put at our disposal. To use the buzz word, modern society is unsustainable. The environment won't let us go on over-consuming, especially as countries like China and India catch up with Europe and America. There isn't enough stuff to go round at Western rates of consumption and we would drown in the resultant pollution. Neither is modern society financially sustainable. The global economic crisis has put paid to the idea that we could live on greed fuelled by debt. I think we shall also find that material goods don't satisfy human beings. I think we shall find that family, friends and society bring us much more happiness than the cult of the individual – even though getting on with other people so often means sacrificing ourselves. I think we shall find that in the end nothing in this world nor all our invented religions and selfish spiritualities can meet our human need. Only God can do that through Jesus and the Church. I'm sure we can make the banquet we have to offer more attractive if we consider how best to worship publicly, to present the Gospel and to welcome people in the light of modern concerns. The prophets were always looking for new ways of putting over the message and so should we in our own generation. That does not mean, however, adapting the message to the world. It means presenting the eternal message in a manner which offers this world its best opportunity to receive it. It means, perhaps, cooking the broccoli better, not coating it in chocolate.

We probably shouldn't be too discouraged. The reason the Bible keeps on about remembering is that most people generally forget: Who God is, what He has done for them, who they are and what is required of them. That has always been true. What is required of us is that we remain faithful and carry on living out the story of the people of God so that the world may see and believe.