

Gordon Giles

Daily Bible readings from Ash Wednesday to Easter Day

FASTING AND FEASTING

Acknowledgments

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SHROVE TUESDAY

We cannot overemphasize the influence of Jewish tradition on the Christian faith, and nowhere is it more prevalent than in the various rituals and attitudes we have with regard to our food. The central rite of the Christian faith, the Eucharist, owes a tremendous amount to the Passover feast, from which it evolved. Our approach to feasting is hardly a Christian invention and the flipside, the fast, also has origins in Jewish practice. As we embark on a food tourist's journey through Lent, we will surely find ourselves spending time at the tables of both Passover and Holy Communion. We will also find ourselves examining tables today and questioning our relationship with food in this day and age. While climate change often steals the headlines, recent government health warnings against obesity suggest that it is as great a problem, yet at the same time many people strive to obtain the slim figure of a supermodel and eat very little. In obscene contrast, the populations of some nations starve. It is no longer obvious that food is always a blessing, and it is timely to consider food as a multidimensional aspect of today's economical, physical and spiritual life.

Before we begin, it is Shrove Tuesday, the spiritual equivalent of the day before the morning after! This day has different traditions (and titles) associated with it in various parts of the world. In the British Isles, pancakes are the order of the day, made with eggs, flour and milk and served with sugary sauces. They are eaten not just as a final binge before the austerity of Lent kicks in, but also as a way of using up such produce, thereby removing temptation from the ensuing 40 days of fasting, which we call Lent. Other countries

have similar traditions: in Iceland, the day is called *Sprennidagur* ('Bursting day') and salted meat and peas are eaten. Meanwhile, the Estonians eat split pea and ham soup on this day. In Sweden, on *Fettisdagen* ('Fat Tuesday') a pastry called *semla* is eaten with hot milk. It is filled with marzipan and whipped cream (and may be eaten on every Tuesday up to Easter). The Finns also eat *semla* but filled with jam instead of marzipan. In Germany and Austria, in Lithuania and in Dutch communities, doughnuts of various kinds are eaten. In Newfoundland there is an added dimension to that of sweet or fatty food: little household objects are hidden in the pancakes (rather as money or trinkets are hidden in British Christmas puddings), and children delight in finding these objects, which are held to bring wealth, love or good fortune.

Shrove Tuesday is not really a feast day as such. It is rather a day prior to a fast day, which is not quite the same thing. Its very name speaks of repentance rather than indulgence and it is good to remember that, while the aroma of maple syrup and pancakes wafts heavenward. 'Shrove' comes from the old English word 'shrive', which means to impose a penance. Thus it was the priest's role to 'shrive' a person: to hear their confession, allocate them penance to amend for their sins and to pronounce God's forgiveness. To be 'shriven' is to have made one's confession and been absolved. The Reformation theologians were rightly concerned about the potential abuses of a mechanistic approach to forgiveness, especially where money changed hands, but it is ironic that Shrove Tuesday is now more associated with gluttony than penitence. Originally, the period from the Sunday before Ash Wednesday (still called 'Quinquagesima' in The Book of Common Prayer) through to the Tuesday was known as 'Shrovetide' and Christians were expected to make confession and receive absolution, in preparation for the great fast of Lent that begins tomorrow.

During that fast, comestibles such as meat, sweet things, fatty food, sauces or anything apparently extravagant would be abandoned until the Easter feast. This tradition is still very much alive, manifesting itself when people give up chocolate or alcohol for Lent. Early tradition

also gives us the threefold discipline of prayer (justice towards God), fasting (justice towards self), and almsgiving (justice towards others). The use of the Gloria at the Mass, and Alleluias, were dropped in Lent, and a general feel of austerity was cultivated. Another devotional tradition also developed, in which this very book stands. Early Christian converts went through a process of instruction prior to baptism during the Lent season (in fact, that is how we acquired Lent in the first place). This was a discipline not only of self-denial but of learning, and the idea of reading books for Lent has descended from that desire for knowledge and truth, so that when Easter Day comes we are not only purer but more knowledgeable about the faith we profess and celebrate. St Benedict declared in his Rule that reading and study were important for any monk, but especially in Lent, when each day a book should be read ‘straight through’.

It is in the spirit of this tradition that I offer you this volume, not so much to be read straight through but to be tasted daily, rather like a journey around the table of the Bible, or like a 46-course banquet. Each day’s ‘plate’ will complement the others while, I hope, being tasty on its own. Ezekiel was commanded to eat a scroll, to feed on the words of the Lord, as a prophetic action: ‘[The Lord said] Eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey’ (Ezekiel 3:3). In Lent it is good to taste and see the goodness of the Lord, perhaps in a different way, bringing out different or new flavours. This year, try a biblical diet of feasting as well as fasting, in which we shall consider passages that are either obviously or subtly about food or drink, or about the Eucharist, or that point us forward to the heavenly banquet to which our Lord Jesus Christ invites each and every one of us.

So as we fast and feast together this Lent, it remains only for me to wish you *bon appetit!*

JOEL'S FAST

Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain-offering and a drink-offering for the Lord, your God? Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy. Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep. Let them say, 'Spare your people, O Lord, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations.'

JOEL 2:12-17

We saw yesterday how the traditions of Shrovetide have their origins in medieval confession and absolution; there are also similarities to Jewish Passover ritual. As we begin Lent, this passage from Joel is read in many churches today. In his brief work of prophecy, Joel declares the 'day of the Lord', the day on which God appears in a blaze of glory but also heralds drought, famine and anguish (see 1:15-18; 2:1-2). He calls for a widespread and complete manifestation of repentance: fasting, weeping and mourning. The tradition of tearing clothes as a sign of grief is not enough: it is time to tear our hearts and return to the Lord. Everyone—men, women, the old and the young—are to participate in a communal ritual of fasting and prayer that acknowledges guilt and indicates to God their sincerity and love.

If the people did what Joel proposed, it must have been quite a sight. Just imagine the whole of our nation or community united in penitence or sorrow for sin. That would be a real start to Lent, wouldn't it? And it would mark a great contrast with our normal practice: it is hard to get people to come to church on Ash Wednesday, the news media do not mention the significance of the day, and there seems to be just as much sin, pain and grief around as there is on any other day. If people do know about Lent, they do not understand it in the way that Joel understands a general fast. For many, Lent is about 'giving something up', and in this spirit we have created traditions that relate to the spiritual fast of Lent in a physical way. Where there are food traditions for eating up surplus supplies on Shrove Tuesday, there is an inevitable dimension in which we think of future deprivation as inspiring and condoning a little gluttony. It works on a simple level: eat something nice, then deny it to yourself and return to it at the end of the fast, when you will appreciate it all the more. In this way, the spiritual season is physically marked out, but it is very different from what Joel had in mind.

The danger is that the physical dimensions, which are supposed to indicate or underline a spiritual attitude, actually replace it. Lent is not really about 'giving something up'. Giving something up is about Lent. Lent is a period in which we are invited to renew our relationship with God, to 'deny ourselves' and 'take up the cross'. If there is something that comes between us and God, it is good to abandon it in Lent, not only in order to draw closer to God but also to engage in the spiritual discipline of self-denial. There is no point in giving up chocolate, alcohol, sugar, caffeine or some activity if doing so is actually quite easy. Lent is not about what you give up, but about what you do. Sadly, though, over the years, Lent has been perceived negatively as a period for saying 'no', when it is far more challenging and edifying to see it as a period in which we say 'yes' to God as well as 'sorry'. Admittedly, that may involve saying 'no' to ourselves at times.

Fasting is not simply about not eating or giving up certain foods. It is about being humble in the presence of God (Isaiah 58:3-4; Ezra

8:21). The first reference to fasting in the Bible comes when David fasts after his indiscretion with Bathsheba has led to her pregnancy, and he prays that the child may be spared (2 Samuel 12:16). Fasts soon became public events and days of fasting were declared, usually by the elders of the community, although sometimes politics intervened. Jezebel ordered that a fast be observed before the trial of Naboth (1 Kings 21:12), and fasting was considered a good idea before warfare (Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 7:6; 2 Chronicles 20:3). Fixed fasts were not very common, except that of the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), instituted in Leviticus 16:29, which was the fast that hindered Paul's journey to Rome (Acts 27:9). Later, fixed fasts were declared, as in Zechariah 8:19, after the temple was destroyed.

There are two fixed fasts in the Christian calendar. One is today and the other is Good Friday. Flanking Lent for hundreds of years, they are just as useful and relevant today as they ever have been. Many today will receive the imposition of ashes on their foreheads as a mark of penitence—an outward sign of the inward grace of forgiveness granted by God, through the saving work of Christ on the cross, to his faithful people in this faithless and sinful age. Thus it is today that we begin Lent, with humility in our hearts, prayers on our lips and ashes on our heads.

Lord Christ, may we remember that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. Help us turn away from sin to be faithful to you. Amen

Thursday

SATAN'S TEMPTING OFFER

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."'

MATTHEW 4:1-4

We begin with Christ, as we must. Soon we shall be returning to the dinners at the dawn of time, when food laws were set and the tables of time were laid according to the eating plan of creation. We shall return to the sixth day of the world, the very eve of sin, when Adam and Eve ate what they should not have eaten, succumbing to temptation amid the indescribable beauty of the garden of Eden, where permission and prohibition cohabited with eternity in prospect. And that is why we must begin with Christ as we travel through Lent from the genesis of creation to the revelation of the resurrection banquet. We begin with Christ, and we will break fast with him in the resurrection glory of the Easter dawn.

Adam and Eve succumbed. Millennia later, Jesus was tempted in the wilderness and stood firm. Paul summarizes the link between the beginning of the Bible and Jesus' ministry forthrightly:

For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ... 'The first man, Adam, became a living being'; the

last Adam became a life-giving spirit... The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven.' (1 Corinthians 15:21–22, 45, 47)

Theologically, the connections between Christ and Adam are strong. Adam is tempted by food, symbolizing rebellion and release from the limitations set by the Creator. Jesus, too, is offered and is therefore tempted by the possibility of food in the form of bread. Like Adam, he can fail the test, satisfy his hunger and break free from divine discipline. But Satan has misjudged, for, as the Father and the Son are one (John 14:10–11), Jesus will not divorce his will from that of the Father.

There is an additional ironic twist in that as Christ is the bread of life (John 6:35), Satan tempts him with a caricature of himself. By accepting Satan's advice, Jesus would be turning away from the spiritual to the material. We all need bread but, thanks to God's goodness, we can get it anywhere. There is only one source of mercy and eternal life, however, and that is Christ, the bread of life. Satan is trying to get Jesus to abandon his mission at the first hurdle.

Jesus does not succeed merely because he can conquer hunger. Turning stones into bread is a simple miracle, comparable perhaps to changing water into wine (John 2:1–11). For many, Christ's 40 days in the wilderness are an inspiration to an ascetic life, or a period of prayer and fasting. The discipline of such fasting, whether in a monastery or a maisonette, has many advantages: fasting is rarely bad for you (and if it is, you should not do it). Today's secular equivalent, the 'detox', has physical benefits comparable with the spiritual benefits of fasting. To combine the two approaches is thoroughly commendable, not least because it restores the connection between body and spirit that life today seems to separate, and reminds us that our relationship with God is about body and soul, unified in prayerful action. This is what Jesus shows us by resisting the first temptation. Turning down stonegrain bread is not about hunger; it is about relationship with God, manifest in the living Word of the bread of life. Defeating the pangs of hunger is not an end in itself but

a means to greater holiness and a deeper relationship with God.

In resisting Satan, Christ undoes the damage that Adam did, restoring fallen humanity, healing the wound of sin. But his victory over Satan does not mean that we are not tempted. Whether we are thinking trivially of cream cakes ('naughty but nice') or seriously of things that hinder our relationship with God, temptation is ever present. Indeed, it is probably more of a problem now than in Jesus' time, because there is far more by which to be tempted. Fortunately, while the temptations are greater than they were, the stakes of sin have been significantly reduced by Christ, whose own resistance to temptation not only shows us the way to salvation but is the first act in his divine task of clearing the path that takes us to the forgiving Father, reigning on the throne of grace.

Father God, we are your children, negligent of your love. Give us a spirit of fasting this Lent, that we may be reconnected to you in renewal and restoration of body and soul. Amen

ADAM'S NEW WORLD

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'

GENESIS 1:26-28

The Bible has a lot to answer for. This famous passage, in which humankind makes a first domineering appearance, lies not only at the root of Judeo-Christian attitudes to our environment (which have tended to be negative) but also at the heart of secular and atheistic conceptions of the meaning of life. It has been consistently misunderstood by both faithful and faithless generations. John Gray, a London professor of European Thought, writes, 'Marxists and free-market economists never tire of ridiculing the idea that other living things have intrinsic value. In their view, other species are just means to the satisfaction of human wants and the earth itself is a site for the realization of human ambitions.'¹ This opinion is striking in two ways.

Firstly, the idea that all creation is ours, and that our dominion amounts to divinely ordained domination of our environment, has been retained by those who have lost almost every other aspect of

faith. Even where faith in God has gone, faith in ourselves is as strong as ever. Yet the idea that we are the monarchs of the natural world makes little sense where there is no doctrine of a Creator who made us so. For Christians, our uniqueness in creation is easily explained in today's passage, for we, unlike any other creature, are created 'in the image of God'. So there is a distinctive kind of nonsense in an atheistic worldview that places humanity at the pinnacle of creation.

Worse still, there is then no ethical basis on which to assert any human right of dominion or domination, nor any being to whom we might be answerable for the way in which we treat other creatures. No theory of evolution, biology, cosmology or secular humanism can give any account as to why humans can consider themselves 'in charge'. At best, these worldviews offer the idea that because we are in control, we must, in some sense, have a right to be. But, as the 18th-century philosopher David Hume put it, 'an "is" does not make an "ought"'—that is, because something is the case, it does not follow that it ought to be so.

Secondly, the view that dominion amounts to domination is not held by the majority of Christians, nor should it be. Some people believe that secularists have pinched from Christianity the idea that the world is a playground for humans, but this is a misrepresentation of our faith. The fact that Christians nowadays may sometimes be involved in animal cruelty, intensive farming, laboratory testing or other unpleasant or morally dubious modes of stewardship does not mean that Christianity, or God, advocates such behaviour. Some Christians steal but that does not mean that Christ advocates theft.

Like atheists, Christians live in a world damaged by sin. The opening passages of Genesis establish the first humans as monarchs of their world, put into Eden to manage the creatures over whom they have power and for whom they must take responsibility. The proper attitude towards fellow creatures is therefore not one of domination, abuse or exploitation. Reverence, care, responsibility and mutuality are the attitudes that should and often do characterize the relationship between humans and other creatures. Sadly, however, the biblical idea of 'dominion' has always been abused and still is.

Ironically, the kind of view that John Gray criticizes as a relic of theism—that dominion equals domination—is itself a form of atheism, for anyone who believes this is in fact denouncing or denying the will of the Creator. As we shall see as we proceed through the Bible, it is not true that God gave humans animals as toys; rather that our interdependence is itself a fundamental part of the created order. To deny that is to deny God. We might expect such a denial from atheists but should be surprised to find it among the faithful, for when it comes to our relationship with other creatures, it is a matter of faith, even for those who profess to have none. Ultimately, the ways in which we steward the resources of the earth reflect what we hold true and dear about the world in which we live, how it came to be and where it will all end up.

Lord Jesus, forgive us when we think too highly of ourselves and thereby write you out of the equation of life. Reveal yourself to those who appreciate your world but do not see you in it, so that all may be brought to the glorious redemption of the children of God. Amen

Saturday

ADAM'S APPLE

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?' The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die."' But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.

GENESIS 3:1-6

Many people think this text is all about sin: it is about not doing what you are told, breaking rules, disobeying God. They are not wrong, but this passage is also about food. It is about what to eat and what not to eat. We take it for granted that God the Creator has the right to tell the man and the woman what they should eat, but, in our supermarket age, this is not something that many are willing to endure. From a very early age we begin to make and express food preferences and to resent being told what to eat by parents or others in authority. Parents know that to give in to the food preferences expressed by toddlers is to make a rod for their own backs, as fussy eaters can grow, sometimes at a frightening rate, into adults who may lack self-discipline, wisdom or intelligence when it comes to

shopping, cooking and dining. There is something fundamentally childish about this man's and this woman's attitude and desire—a mixture of knowing what is right and wrong but also wanting to rebel, to seize power and discover whether the consequences are as dire as the parent figure tells them.

There is a sense in which nothing changes. Parents know best but children want to assert their own independence. It is exactly the same when it comes to our relationship with our heavenly Father, who, having created us, knows what is best for us. Yet we want to go our own way, assert our own will and enjoy what we take to be freedom to do as we please.

Nowadays, food independence is probably more dangerous than it ever has been. For Adam and Eve there was only one plant—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—that they were forbidden to touch, and they were forbidden its fruit because it was bad for them. Today we have so much more choice, more to tempt us and more to hurt us. And because it is available, we succumb to indiscipline and indulge in foods that are distinctly bad for us. Either the foodstuffs themselves are dangerous, such as the Japanese fish *fugu*, which if not prepared properly can be lethal, or the additives we use in cookery are potentially dangerous, such as propyl gallate, butylated hydroxyanisole (BHA) and butylated hydroxytoluene (BHT), which may be added to oil but can cause cancer. The ubiquitous monosodium glutamate (MSG) is a chemical that many believe can enhance the flavour of food but can also be harmful.

The other danger from foodstuffs concerns the quantities we consume. With so much food available to us, it is easy to be disobedient to our bodies' needs: to consume more than we can or should take in, and therefore cause harm to ourselves. Overeating used to be considered a weakness of character—to be ridiculed, perhaps—but now it is reaching epidemic proportions in the West and is more like a sociological and physical disease. Yet overeating is a form of disobedience to nature—a rejection of our natural limitations and the spiritual dimension of our physical lives. This disobedience was classically articulated in the tradition of the 'Seven Deadly Sins', of

which gluttony is one. Today, gluttony is perhaps more dangerous than ever before, particularly now that increased availability of food has produced the twofold problem of foodstuffs addictions and 'comfort' eating.

There are two levels at which overeating and dangerous eating are selfish. Firstly, those who hurt themselves in any way cause financial, emotional and physical stress to the families, societies and communities to which they belong. Increasing trends in obesity are going to cost Western governments a fortune in the coming years, drawing funds from other conditions that may cause suffering to those who cannot be said to be so responsible for the diseases they endure.

Secondly, wilfully doing anything that endangers our own health is tantamount to a rejection of our status as created beings, into whom God has breathed spiritual and physical life. Those who take risks with what they eat could be indicating that they do not value the life with which they have been blessed. They may also believe that pleasure is a driving dimension of existence. The life we have is not given us solely for our own benefit, and it is not therefore entirely ours to dispose of or abuse. Undisciplined eating is a form of slow suicide, and we are as accountable to God for what we eat as for anything else that we do to ourselves or others.

Lord, help us turn away from sin and death to the freedom found in obedience to your word of life. Amen