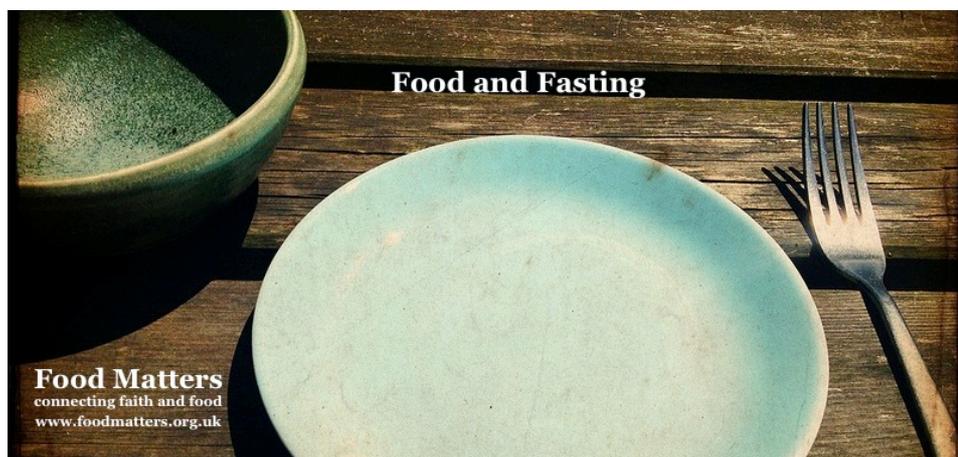


Food and Fasting: A Resource for Lent



Introduction

By Alison Webster

In their bestselling book, 'The Fast Diet', Michael Mosley and Mimi Spencer acknowledge the religious and spiritual origins of the concept of fasting:

'Fasting is nothing new...your body is designed to fast. We evolved at a time when food was scarce; we are the product of millennia of feast and famine...Fasting, of course, remains an article of faith for many. The fasts of Lent, Yom Kippur and Ramadan are just some of the better-known examples. Greek Orthodox Christians are encouraged to fast for 180 days of the year (according to Saint Nikolai of Zicha, "Gluttony makes a man gloomy and fearful, but fasting makes him joyful and courageous"), while Buddhist monks fast on the new moon and full moon of each lunar month.'

The 'fasting diet' suggests that weight can be lost and other health gains made, by fasting for two days out of every seven. Hence the diet's other name, the 5:2 diet. Many people have found it to be extremely effective. Whether you consider the Fast Diet to be a fad, a con, or a miracle, its popularity might cause Christians to pause for thought. How do we incorporate fasting into our lives as a spiritual practice or discipline? Might there be opportunities in fasting for 'sustaining the sacred centre', and enhancing our relationship with God? And can we use it to renew our focus on justice, and concern for our neighbours? Lent is the season when it is particularly appropriate to ask these questions and to explore the possibilities of fasting.

Food Matters centres on the conviction that eating is not just a biological act, but also a political and ecological one. In his book, 'The Spirituality of Fasting', Charles M Murphy says, 'Eating is...a religious act that celebrates our greatest ties to God, the earth, and one another. Thinking of eating in this way helps us to realise how greatly reduced and less satisfying eating has become when it is nothing more than a refuelling exercise engaged in alone and on the run'.

This Lent resource has at its heart four 'think pieces' written especially for Food Matters by theologian Angela Tilby. Building on Angela's thoughts, I will explore four aspects of fasting in the Christian tradition, with prayers and reflections. Additionally, an introductory and concluding session enhance our biblical engagement with the issues of food, fasting and spirituality.

How to use this resource

Each session has material for group study as well as for individual prayer and reflection. As a group, begin with the Bible Study recommended. Read the passage and discuss the questions together. Follow this by reading out the Reflections. Further discussion might focus on new issues contained in the Reflections, and on drawing the links between the Bible passage and the Reflections. A concluding prayer is offered for each section.

1) Thinking About Food

Bible Reading: Acts 10

- Read the story of Peter and Cornelius together.
- What mention is made of food in the passage?
- What is the significance of eating and drinking in the passage?
- Think of an occasion when you have been challenged to eat food that was strange to you. What happened? How did it feel? What did you learn?

Reflection

What we eat, how and when are crucial to our identity and culture. Food can function to transcend barriers between human beings, but it can also reinforce difference and be a source of conflict. Religious traditions can have very strict rules about what food is clean and unclean - and each of us has our boundaries about what we consider to be edible and inedible. British culture, for instance, finds it acceptable to eat pigs, cows and sheep, but not horses or dogs. Other cultures differ. Vegetarians within any culture find it unacceptable to eat flesh of fish or animal.

Food can be a means of cross-cultural exploration. A key way of learning about someone who is different from us is to eat their food, and learn about its origins and methods of preparation. We can build community through sharing food. How interesting, then, that God chose to challenge Peter's assumptions about clean and unclean foods as a way to open his eyes to the much bigger point that it was time to welcome Gentiles into the Christian community, and to build it beyond the boundaries of Judaism.

Prayer

God of limitless boundaries and a generous heart,
Open us to the risk of expansion.
Give us the curiosity to try new things,
To always be alert to your presence
In unexpected places.
Keep us learning, growing and asking questions
For the sake of your kingdom on earth,
Amen

2) Food and Dieting

Bible Reading: 1 Corinthians 6: 12 - 20

- Read the passage together.
- What aspect of this passage strikes you most powerfully?
- What does it suggest are the characteristics of a Christian approach to bodilyness?
- What do you think constitutes 'enslavement' (v 12) and how can it be avoided?
- If our bodies are 'temples of the Holy Spirit', how should we eat?

Reflections

By Angela Tilby

We have a troubled relationship with food these days. We worry about what is in it. We worry about our weight and our health. One of the new diets that is being talked up at the moment is the two day fasting diet. Eat what you like for five days, but limit your intake to about 500 calories for two days a week. Many claim to have lost pounds on this regime. But the success of a diet depends on whether it works in the long term, and managing two days on starvation rations is a tall order when the weeks turn into months and you are still barely eating for two days a week. If you have to watch your weight it is important to find a diet that works for you. By that I mean one which enables you to eat what you like. Personally I have found a version of the low-carb diet fairly satisfactory. I seem to be one of those people whose appetite is stimulated by starchy foods – it isn't the bread and pasta itself that puts weight on, but the fact of eating them that makes me hungry. Others do much better on a diet that is high in carbohydrate but rigorous about excluding as much fat as possible.

Part of our problem is that we shop in supermarkets. There are just too many foods available in too many bewildering and tempting varieties. We pick up more than we need or want and then either consume or waste what we cannot eat. So those of us who easily overeat may be wise to work out what they can happily do without and make it a habit. As long as it is green it is good for you. God likes green and so should we.

Fasting and Dieting

By Alison Webster

Fasting has fallen out of favour in most Christian denominations these days. This is due, in part, to past excesses of self-starvation and mortification of the flesh, now considered barbaric and unnecessary. Throughout scripture, however, fasting is referred to as abstaining from food and drink for spiritual purposes. 'Complete fasting' means eating and drinking nothing – not even water (without supernatural intervention this can last up to 3 days only, for obvious reasons). 'Partial fasting' refers to limiting the amount of food we eat, but continuing to take liquids. This can be sustained for short periods of time (for instance, John Wesley would take no food before 3pm on Wednesdays and Fridays), or for weeks. In Christian terms at least, the key difference between dieting and fasting is that the former is undertaken for physical purposes, the latter for spiritual ones.

Dieting is, of course, virtually compulsory in our society. Theologian Charles Murphy says, '...our national eating disorder explains how dieting has replaced fasting for many people. People diet, of course, in order to achieve better health. Often, however, dieting becomes an obsession if

individuals have absorbed cultural models of beauty and attractiveness that are inhuman and oppressive and that cause them to hate themselves and their bodies’.

In other words, dieting can be a sickness. It can involve alienation from the body, and often leads to a complete loss of ability to recognise hunger and fullness. Fasting, by contrast, should be about befriending the body and learning to listen to it more carefully and closely.

Prayer

God who calls us ‘beloved’,
You made each of us
A fragile ecosystem,
Not entire unto itself,
But vulnerable
To disruption by others;
Open, needing, desiring,
To be loved.
Remind us that,
Just as without food and water
We quickly fade
And become weak,
So also, without others
We cannot live.
And without you,
There is no reason to.

Amen

3) Food and Discipline

Bible Reading: Matthew 11: 11 - 18

- Read the passage together.
- What questions do you have about this passage?
- Have you 'given something up' for Lent? Is so, what, and why?
- What is the value in giving things up?
- Is there something new you would like to embrace?
- How did eating and drinking, or refraining from eating and drinking, help John the Baptist and Jesus in their respective callings? What relevance does this have for us?

Reflections

By Angela Tilby

For centuries Christians took fasting and abstinence seriously. Many still do. The Orthodox abstain from certain foods through Lent, subtracting more items from the daily diet as they approach Holy Week until they reach a total fast. I have no doubt that fasting is an authentic spiritual discipline and an aid to prayer. I firmly believe this in theory but I have to confess that I personally struggle to practice it as I like food a lot and am nearly always aware of when the next meal is due. I try to abstain from something in Lent, even if it is only chocolate. The hardest thing I ever gave up was tomato ketchup. It made chips, sausages and all the things I really like so boring. But the result was that I kicked the ketchup habit for good. It just didn't taste right after forty days without.

The only time I really got into fasting was when I was rather depressed. I saw the pounds drop off and it made me feel strong. And that worried me. The trap for anorexics is that they feel empowered from the sense of control they get by not eating. It is not that they don't feel hungry, they do, but they feed on their own hunger. Many in the fashion industry drink and take drugs rather than eat normally, because they might lose work if they put on weight. Those who fast for spiritual reasons sometimes express an unattractive superiority of spirit, claiming to be not only physically, but morally more pure than others. Medically much of this claim is nonsense. We are not normally full of toxins; our digestive organs take care of that. The best fasting, as Jesus suggested, is that done in secret and in a spirit of penitence while we go about our normal life.

Fasting as a Spiritual Practice

By Alison Webster

Fasting reminds us that we are, first and foremost, spiritual beings and children of God. When Jesus taught his disciples the Lord's prayer, he suggested that they say, 'Give us today our daily bread'. Another meaning of the Greek word we translate as 'daily' also means 'beyond material'. In other words, we do not live by bread alone, but by 'every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.' (Matthew 4:4) Fasting can remind us of our complete dependence upon God for our lives and our livelihoods. As David writes in Psalm 69:10, 'I humbled my soul with fasting'.

Fasting is said to help us to keep a balance in our lives – to keep things in a healthy perspective, and to resist cravings for things we do not need. Some Christians abstain from things other than food: social media, TV, use of mobile phones, noise, and people, as a way of reconnecting with what is important, refocusing on God, coming closer to God and sidelining distractions.

This focus can help us with the important spiritual practice of discernment. Each of us is unique and infinitely beloved of God, and we each have a unique role to play in the world. When we fast we can concentrate and reflect on listening to what God wants of us in our lives. Those who fast regularly sometimes say that the process helps them to uncover emotions lying below the surface of their awareness - anger, bitterness, jealousy, etc. Apparently the things which are within us surface when we fast. They can then more readily be dealt with, so that the 'fruits of the spirit' can be cultivated in their place.

Because it redirects us towards God, fasting is a joyful act. As Jesus said, 'When you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting...But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be

seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your father who sees in secret will reward you' (Mt 6: 16 – 18)

Prayer

God of infinite understanding,
Only through you
Can we find a way
Through
Our confusions, fears, uncertainties;
Our wanting and wishing and waiting.
We cannot see
What you see.
We cannot believe
That you believe in us.
We cannot love ourselves
In the way that you love us.
Give us a thread to cling onto,
A delicate lifeline
To guide us
Through
And beyond.

Amen

4) Food and Justice

Bible Reading: Luke 16: 19 - 31

- Read the story of the rich man and Lazarus together.
- What are your feelings as you read this story?
- Which of the characters do you relate to most immediately?
- What does it say to us about food poverty in our world today?

Reflections

By Angela Tilby

Sugar is evil, fat is evil, processed meat is evil. Avoid fruit juice and fizzy drinks, don't eat ready meals. Cut down on the booze, eat your five a day of veg and fruit. I suppose it is inevitable that those who are concerned for the nation's health should issue this constant stream of food advice but I grow weary of it, and the constant guilt it produces in those of us who are less than perfect. The

problem is with this advice is the assumption that people have a choice. Yet sheer economics prevent many people from taking up the message. Good food does not come cheap. If you want to eat well, buy the best, or grow your own vegetables and keep your own chickens. Most of us don't have such choice. We do not live near to an independent butcher, an organic greengrocer, and a baker who produces fresh healthy bread twice a day. And even if you do so, you will pay a lot for what you get. You can see why those who are struggling to pay the bills are inevitably driven towards food that is cheap and satisfying rather than food that is wholesome. Cheap ingredients laden with salt, sugar and fat provide an instant lift while setting up a craving for more. My first ever Krispy Kreme donut was a salutary experience. Before I had finished eating it I was longing for another. I was hooked at the first bite.

Yet what do we serve up at church events? Sausage rolls, fizzy drinks, squares of pizza? Pity the Archdeacons and Bishops who have to live on such fare! The former Bishop of Salisbury used to keep a banana in his car and eat nothing until he was safely back inside. Why can't the Church do some creative thinking about food that is both cheap and good? It would speak volumes about the goodness of God in creation.

Fasting and Justice

By Alison Webster

In his book, 'The Spirituality of Fasting', Charles M Murphy says, 'Social charity is the defining characteristic of Christian fasting. One of the main reasons Christians fast is to fight against innate human selfishness and possessiveness, and to resist the social forces that drive us to consume more and more of the earth's resources at the expense of the poor. They fast to practice solidarity with the poor by practicing the virtue of temperance'.

Resisting selfishness and possessiveness within ourselves is important, but equally so is the imperative to work to remedy unjust structures; to campaign for justice, especially in all aspects of food production, distribution and consumption.

One of the most powerful biblical injunctions about fasting comes from the prophet Isaiah, who clearly rejects fasting if it is not accompanied by a true change in how we live:

'Is not this the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?' (Isaiah 58: 6 – 7)

There is much structural injustice at work in our world, including within our own country. According to a recent report, 'Walking the Breadline: tackling the scandal of food poverty in Britain' Oxfam UK and Church Action on Poverty draw our attention to the fact that in Britain right now:

- four million people do not have access to a healthy diet; nearly thirteen million people live below the poverty line, and it is becoming harder and harder for them to afford healthy food.
- People who are forced to live on an inadequate diet have a significantly increased risk of developing serious health conditions such as cancer, heart disease, obesity and diabetes. They are also more likely to suffer from stress, ill health, poor educational attainment and shortened life expectancy.
- The rising cost of living combined with austerity cuts is forcing poor families to choose whether to pay their bills or put food on the table.

- Food banks and charities are currently meeting the essential needs of many families and individuals in crisis, feeding adults and children who would otherwise have nothing to eat.
- Over 500,000 people are now reliant on food aid – the use of food banks and receipt of food parcels. Changes to the benefit system and benefit sanctions, are the most common causes of people using food banks.

Give us This Day our Daily Bread: A Reflection

This reflection can be used as part of an act of worship, to highlight food issues.

Give out a small piece of bread to each participant at the beginning, and invite them to hold it, then eat it or simply look at it, as they see fit. Then say:

This, my friends, is a piece of bread.

Bread comes in many forms. It can be made of a variety of flours: With yeast or without. Bread is important in many cultures.

Bread is diverse.

Bread stands for all food, and therefore is symbolic of abundance.

It speaks of all gifts and all giftedness, and therefore of grace and generosity.

But it also represents austerity and scarcity.

It is the food of Birkenau and Belsen, as well as the food of the banquet.

It is the most basic and cheap of subsistence foods.

We measure our economy by benchmarking the price of a loaf of bread.

Those living in poverty are said to be living 'on the breadline'.

This is the line that separates eating and not eating;

Choice and no choice;

freedom and enslavement.

A reading from Simone Weil's, 'Waiting for God':

'Bread is a necessity for us. We are beings who continually draw our energy from outside, for as we receive it we use it up in effort. If our energy is not daily renewed, we become feeble and incapable of movement. Besides actual food, in the literal sense of the word, all incentives are sources of energy for us. Money, ambition, consideration, decorations, celebrity, power, our loved ones, everything that puts into us the capacity for action is like bread. If any one of these attachments penetrates deeply enough into us to reach the vital roots of our carnal existence, its loss may break us and even cause our death. That is called dying of love. It is like dying of hunger. All these objects of attachment go together with food, in the ordinary sense of the word, to make up the daily bread of this world. It depends entirely on circumstances whether we have it or not. We should ask nothing with regard to

circumstances unless it be that they may conform to the will of God. We should not ask for earthly bread.'

Say the Lord's Prayer together.

5) Food and Beauty

Bible Reading: Song of Songs 4: 10 - 16 (or just about any passage from this book)

- Read the passage together.
- Which of the five senses are evoked in this passage?
- How many kinds of food and drink are mentioned?
- How are they used to celebrate bodiliness and beauty?
- How is sensuality reflected in our spiritual practice as church?

Reflections

By Angela Tilby

I am addicted to Masterchef. I love the drama of it. The hopefulness of the amateur cooks, the theatre of the kitchen with the ingredients beautifully laid out, the crack of eggs, the spin of sugar, the fierce bubbling of a sauce reducing, the race against time, the anxious serving up and the final judgement of the experts. But I wonder what it is that I am really enjoying. Is it the game show element, the competitiveness? Or is it something rather more sinister, a kind of gastro-porn in which the finished plate is like the final unveiling of an unavailable body? C.S. Lewis once wrote that we could see how pornography represented a disordered bodily instinct if we compared it with our approach to food. We would never, he thought, drool longingly over food in the way we might over half naked bodies. But Lewis was wrong. There is a drool factor with food which is well exploited by chefs as well as food photographers. The glistening white plate with its delicate medallion of meat or fish, the brilliant orange baby carrot with its pale stalk intact, the smear of coulis seducing the eye before the taste-buds are engaged. Now I am not one to criticise good presentation; good food deserves to look good. But food is not a painting. It is in the end to be consumed, not gazed at. When we think of the amount of food we waste we should treat what we have with reverence and eat and drink with joy.

Fasting and Embodiment

By Alison Webster

Much of our contemporary life affirms the importance of bodiliness. The Christian tradition has, at times, been informed by an unhealthy dualism between body and spirit – the former being considered inferior to the latter. But most Christians now adopt a holistic approach, recognising that the body and the soul are inseparable and interdependent. We know God only as embodied beings (at least in this life), and we have to go deeply into ourselves to know God. I Cor 6: 19 reminds us that our body is a temple not a tomb.

Jesus summarised his mission as giving life: 'I have come that they might have life and have it to the full' (John 10:10), and St Irenaeus famously said that 'the glory of God is the human person who is

fully alive'. As human beings we constantly make inferior choices. We do not choose what is best for us. Fasting can help us to refocus on the choices that allow us to be the persons we truly wish to be.

Fasting is not about self-hatred or self-punishment. It affirms the fundamental goodness of the human person, the uniqueness of and value of each one of us. It is not about diminishment, but about coming into one's own.

Could we therefore see fasting as a form of resistance? It is a way of working against the many culturally endorsed addictions that infect our modern lives: particularly individualism, materialism, commodification; the need for status, achievement, success; our inhuman pace of life and the environmental pollution that results from it.

Prayer

God of hills and skies,
Oceans and rivers,
Of the earth and of all growing things,
Forgive our carelessness with our surroundings,
Our casual dismissals,
Our refusal to pay attention,
To take note,
To love what you have made.
When we eat,
Renew our senses,
Sharpen our awareness,
Of what we see, hear, smell, touch and taste.
Remind us that the simple act of eating,
Is a matter of life and death,
And that what we eat,
And how we eat it,
Can give life to others,
Or take it from them.

Amen

6) Food and Forgiveness

Bible Reading: Luke 15: 11 - 32

- Read the story of the Prodigal Son together.
- When and how is food an important part of the story?
- When the younger son is in want, what is he hungry for?

- What is the purpose of the feast?
- How do you feel about the older son's response.

Reflection

As we have seen throughout these study sessions, food has diverse and multiple meanings in scripture. Indeed, we have merely scratched the surface. Food and feeding have deep spiritual meanings analogous to the critical role that nutrition plays in our physical wellbeing. Without physical food, we die. Without God, we cease to be the people we were meant to be.

As human beings we fall short: we collude with systems that condemn others to poverty and starvation; we cannot resist the temptations of possessiveness, greed and prioritising our own safety and security above that of others. We can be vain and overconcerned with outer appearances: enslaved by the superficialities of our consumerist culture. Yet our God is forgiving and generous, and will celebrate with a feast our turning away from injustice.

God is known to us through our senses - our bodiliness. When we pay attention to what we see, hear, smell, touch and taste, we are savouring God's creation. Our physicality is a precious gift to be cherished and enjoyed.

God is revealed to us directly, and through others, in acts of 'breaking bread'. When we share food with others we share ourselves too. We build community through hospitality. We build the body of Christ.

Prayer

God of mercy

May we speak of your compassion

In all that we are

And all that we do.

We know that the hungry are among us

In our churches, our streets and our towns.

Often this hunger goes with shame and secrecy, despair and distress

It comes through change, and loss.

The hungry are also far away, across the globe,

Struggling with the vast anonymity of an economic system

That works in favour of the few, with little regard for the many.

We cry out for justice and peace

And we commit ourselves to doing anything that we can

To build an economy of grace

Where all are fed.

Amen

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February 2014