

Food, Glorious Food (February 2024)

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by Rev Paul Graham

Churches traditionally spend the time between Christmas and Easter focussing their preaching on the life and ministry of Jesus. Focus is usually on themes such as his baptism and presentation at the Temple, the temptation by Satan, the calling of the disciples and various of his many miracles and teachings. All this in the attempt to show the world that significant events took place in the 30+ years between the cradle and the cross.

However, this year's calendar doesn't allow much time for this as it feels like we have only just finished the annual wrestle of returning the Christmas decorations to the loft and we're already moving into Lent. We may still have leftover cheese in the fridge, or some eaten treats lurking in the dark recesses of the freezer, but the supermarkets segued smoothly from mince pies to hot cross buns^[1], from selection boxes to mini eggs before 2023 had finally ended. In response, the Rt Revd Rachel Treweek, Bishop of Gloucester, called out two of the big supermarkets for such a rapid move, reminding them that Christmas at least lasts until Epiphany.

And supermarkets who realised that there is another opportunity to sell chocolates and cards found yet more room for Valentine's Day treats while people were still buying last-minute Christmas presents. However, even these heart-shaped chocolate boxes and heart-bearing bunnies will be fully overwhelmed by their Easter counterparts once February 15th dawns.

This year you can eschew the supermarkets' offerings and celebrate Valentine's Day with leftover pancakes from the previous day's Shrove Tuesday dinner. For those who usually abstain from chocolate during Lent, it may be therefore easier to relinquish that last Rolo to your nearest and dearest (unless they also join you on that fast). Even better news for chocoholics who will keenly feel its absence through the 6 long Lenten weeks is that as Easter falls on the last day of March, even those last few Christmas chocolates should still be in date when you crack open that first egg. Though if you need help removing such temptation from your life, your minister is willing to offer a self-sacrificial disposal service for you...

Food will continue to mark our journey to Easter, and not just in its ovoid chocolate conclusion. Whether you are like me and try to keep your consumption of hot cross buns to the latter stages of Lent or have to celebrate Easter Sunday lunch with roast lamb (with or without mint sauce) or have some other culinary tradition that you adhere to, there is one meal that remains central to the Easter story. I refer to Communion, the Last Supper, the Eucharist, the Breaking of Bread.

A simple meal, usually of bread and wine, that features in church services across the world wherever they can gather safely. Globally celebrated anything from annually to every time people meet for worship, our own pattern has us hold communion services twice a month, once in the morning as part of the regular service and once in the evening in a service with the meal as its sole focus. The words of invitation, the people who share the meal, even the type of bread that is broken may be different, but the event we all remember and the person who instituted it remain the same.

For those of you who joined us during the COVID pandemic, we continued sharing in communion together over Zoom, using anything from biscuits and tea to cake and port as representatives of the bread and wine. From the safety of our own homes we still met, remembered and joined in the meal at Jesus's invitation. Back in the church building as we have been for a while now, we still meet, remember and join in.

Stepping carefully into controversial territory for a moment, it grieves me that the one meal that should unite the entire global community of the Christian church is still one that divides us. Because there are divergent understandings of what happens to the bread and wine, and there are different rules governing who can do what in the service, we cannot come together as Jesus prayed on that first occasion to “be one” (John 17:21). Not that I’m suggesting that the way that we do things in the Baptist world is the one to which all others should conform. I just wish there was a way that we could find a way to join together as Jesus hoped.

That sojourn into an appeal for ecumenical unity aside, Communion at Clare Baptist Church takes centre stage on Maundy Thursday evening as we meet in the church building, and again on Easter Sunday morning both in the Country Park at 7:00 and then later during our Easter Morning Celebration Service. Three occasions where we will remember that Jesus died once and for all. Three occasions when all are welcome to respond to the invitation of Jesus to take, eat and drink.

But, of course, those aren’t the only occasions when you will be eating and drinking over the coming weeks. Even taking into account those people we’ve already mentioned who eschew chocolate during Lent, there are still plenty of opportunities to eat and drink, usually around 3 times a day as standard. Some of these may well be with friends and family. Some of these may be with other Christians – we will be having a shared lunch during February to prove it.

We often use Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth as part of our Communion services. 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 is a particular favourite passage. However, the context of this was Paul berating the believers in that young church for the way that they treated each other at mealtimes. The church, being made up of a mix of social classes, had some among their number who didn’t need to work and could afford long, lavish, idle meals. Others, the working classes, would arrive later, with their own meagre supplies, and yet others came with nothing. Rather than operate a “Bring and Share” policy, so beloved by churches nowadays, there was a definite divide between the “haves” and the “have nots”.

Paul’s point is two-fold. Firstly, no one should go without, and I’m glad to say that usually the problem at the church here in Clare is one of excess, rather than paucity. Secondly, and the point that is largely missed, is that Communion is part and parcel of every shared meal. Whether or not we take the time to explicitly go through the actions of Jesus of “Take, Eat, Drink”, we all do that naturally when we come together to eat and drink.

So maybe our ecumenical problem isn’t such a big one. If we understand Communion as also happening every time we gather together as a Christian community and “Take, Eat, Drink”, then we can also include those occasions when we do that at the invitation of others, and by inviting others to join us for any meal. Whenever and wherever that may be.

[1] Though, in reality, hot cross buns are increasingly available all year, which seems a bit of a pity.