

Food For Thought

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Read Acts 10:1-23



What do tuna and tomatoes have in common? Apart from being two of the prime ingredients in a tuna pasta bake, they mark two transitional points of my life. For years, I would chow down on tuna pasta salads at every possible occasion. Be they harvest suppers, bring and share lunches, or providing simple sustenance for the frequent visitors who landed at our doorstep seeking a meal and a bed for the night, the regularity of this dish (served hot or cold depending on the time of year) met with my desire to eat it until it emerged from my ears.

However, the humble tomato was a different story. This red ball of juicy evil was eschewed whenever it cropped in a recognisable form at these same meals. I'm not being anti-salad here; cucumbers would be devoured with joy, celery crunched with gusto, even lettuce in its many hues and guises was munched with abandon. However, the tomato was left bereft and alone, rejected in favour of other treats such as pork pies or the much anticipated but seldom seen scotch egg.

Of course, the tomato was just about acceptable as long as it was well hidden; ketchup sandwiches were a guilty pleasure, and as for a cheese and tomato quiche! Just so long as the tomato wasn't too dominant, or recognisable, or fleshy, or still clinging to its skin, or served alone, devoid of its more palatable companions.

Fast forward several years and the culinary boot is very much on the other foot. Tomatoes are very much acceptable in any form and a welcome addition to any plate from a full English to a BLT. However, don't get me started on tuna...

Food features heavily in the story we read today; part one of a lengthier episode that we will be dipping into over these next three weeks. Food is ultimately being used as a metaphor here, one which we will be

revisiting over time, but we would be wise to look a little more closely at the context here.

The food laws for a first century Jew were complicated and steeped in historical significance. Turning back to Leviticus, we can see how many animals were banned from the table (Leviticus 11:1-23). Some of these are fair game; I'm not sure that I would fancy a camel casserole or vulture pie anyway and I can't even picture a rock badger, let alone contemplate shoving it between two slices of bread.

There are other foods listed that the carnivores amongst us probably don't take issue with; I'm partial to a plate of calamari and though my experience of a bunny Balti was less pleasant, this was due to liberal quantities of chilli rather than the meat itself. And as for the good old pig, in deference of which I am now craving a bag of pork scratchings whilst typing this, I am a devoted admirer and consumer of almost the entire animal. My apologies to the vegetarians (and vegans) out there, but as a lapsed member of your flock I acknowledge my abject weakness when tempted by the aroma of a bacon sandwich.

However, the picture painted in Acts is of a picnic comprising of exactly those creatures forbidden in Leviticus. A teeming, wriggling blanket of detestable comestibles is presented before a ravenous Peter and the challenge is issued. If you're hungry, help yourself.

Of course, Peter, being a good Jewish boy, refuses. Not once, he protests, has he allowed himself to eat anything forbidden and he's not about to start now, even if it is only a dream. The enticing(?) selection is offered a further couple of times before the alarm clock sounds and Peter is returned to the land of the living, bemused and confused by the temptations placed before him. There are sounds below not of pots and pans heralding the imminent arrival of a kosher meal, but rather of unexpected guests. And there we leave them for this week...

But we are left with a conundrum. What is God saying here? It doesn't seem to be a consistent message; for centuries the Jewish people have been following the teachings handed down to Moses and Aaron in the desert about what and what not to serve for dinner. But now that same God is telling Peter that everything is fair game; that what was once deemed unclean and detestable is now available and edible.

This is earth-shattering for Peter, even if it is only a dream. A lifelong avoidance of sausages is null and void; at last, there is a gap in the market for those who fancy selling lizard pizzas to a curious clientele. But isn't that a bit of a *volte face* for the almighty? Let's face it, so strict were the cleanliness laws that should a gecko run across your plate (let alone be served on a bed of rice), that plate must be smashed. A loose feather falling on a piece of clothing or item of furniture would deem that article unclean, ripe for destruction.

But now all this is changed. In one dream, Peter's whole world, not just his culinary habits, is turned on its head. And at God's instruction as well. Not only is he permitted to eat what is deemed unclean, it seems that they are no longer deemed unclean anyway. This isn't just a case of letting something go for the sake of convenience or hunger; the forbidden fruit bat is now acceptable in God's sight.

So where does this leave us?

It would seem that the obvious challenge is to review our attitudes and responses to things in the light of this. There might be the temptation to say that, *carte blanche*, God's universal approval of everything on the menu can be transferred into any and every area of life. But that would be a) too simplistic and b) too wrong. That's not to say that God isn't challenging us to review the areas where we are unjust, unloving, ungracious and whole lot of other "uns" that mar his image in us. Of course, the Holy Spirit is at work in each one of us, gently (or not so gently if we're not listening) probing, prodding and questioning us; honing us to be the people that God created us to be.

We could go into a lengthy discussion about whether this is another example of God changing his mind

and what this tells us about his constancy, but I don't believe that's the most important lesson for us to learn this week. You'll have to wait a while for this...

As we leave Peter until next Sunday, he is no more the wiser as to why he's been presented with this smorgasbord of slithering snacks than the poor creatures themselves. In the same way, we sometimes (oftentimes) have no idea why things happen to us. Sometimes (oftentimes), it is only with the benefit of hindsight that we can see why we travelled a certain road, or life took us down a certain path. Sometimes, peer as we might back into the mists of the past, we are still none the wiser. It's on occasions like this that we are asked to trust God, something that Peter certainly had to learn more times than he had hot dinners.

This current pandemic, for example, is probably meant to teach us a whole load of lessons about community, responsibility, hand hygiene and neighbourliness. However, seeing the ways that people have reacted and responded in ways that are deeply selfish and self-seeking, it seems that the "why" is travelling a lot slower than the "how".

God does things for a reason. At the time, Peter had no idea what was behind the sudden relaxation of the food laws. Those of us who read the opening lines of the chapter (and certainly those who read ahead) will know what is going on here, but Peter is very much in the dark.

Like us, he's got to wait for things to become a little clearer...

Amen.

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