

Our Relationship with Food – Cathedral talk 2020

First of all thank you for inviting me to speak on this middle Sunday of Fairtrade Fortnight. I would like today to pick up on our readings this morning and talk more generally about our relationship with food.

In our readings today the temptation offered by food is a key theme – an apple, some bread. Some of us will have given up some food item for Lent. Only five days in, dare I ask how it is going so far? Has anybody been tempted? Has anyone fallen? No, you don't have to put your hands up! Food so often tempts us from the straight and narrow. It was not for nothing that Salman Rushdie's famous slogan for cream cakes 'naughty but nice' was so successful. We know we shouldn't but.....

Food is central to our well-being as humans, and, I would argue central to our faith. Why, then do we abuse it so readily? Why don't we treat it with more respect and value it more highly? Why are we tempted by the cheapest or the sweetest, or the one with the most fat? Why are we so easily tempted to make bad choices?

Eating and drinking are also central to the gospels and particularly Luke's gospel where there are at least 8 meals at which Jesus sits and eats and two more where that is implied. The importance of food in our own lives is obvious, it is the fuel that keeps us going. But we all know it is more than this, it is also an important part of our social interactions and arguably our relationship with God. When Jesus eats and drinks, he often uses that time to talk to his disciples and others about spiritual matters. A meal is not just about food but about social intercourse as well.

The evening meal should be when the family sits down and discusses its day, when family bonds are strengthened. I would argue that like the Shabbat meal in the Jewish tradition, the evening meal can have an almost sacred quality to it as we share food and the love that has been part of its provision and preparation. Sadly, however, fewer and fewer families now sit down to eat together. More than one in five families only sit down to eat a meal together once or twice a week, according to a recent survey. And 40 per cent of families only sit down together to have a meal three times a week. Pressure of work and busy lifestyles mitigate against this according to research, yet the same research shows that eating as a family has so many benefits in terms of strengthening family relationships, educating children, and ensuring that

everyone eats a healthier diet. How easily we are tempted away from such an important activity!

That most important meal in our faith, the last supper, the template for our communion, is heavy with symbolism and emotion. Let us be thankful Jesus didn't say to his disciples, 'Cancel that upper room we'll snack as we go along'.

But then we seem to have broken many of our basic connections to food which after all is God-given as we are frequently reminded in the Bible. So broken is that connection that we happily waste vast amounts of it while others in our society struggle to feed their families. We burn food waste in our power stations, while those who live in more marginal agricultural regions of the world starve. God gives abundantly to us in order to share it with others. We produce more than enough food in the world to feed all 7 billion adequately, but we choose not to.

The French have passed a law to make stores give their food waste to food banks. Perhaps we should do the same. Many have said that the giving of food that is 'past its sell-by date' to foodbanks or night shelters is the modern equivalent of the Old Testament idea of leaving some crops around the edge of the field for 'the poor' to gather. We are keen to blame supermarkets but 70% of waste comes from our own homes. We throw away 7.1 million tons of food and drink a year from our homes and more than half of that could have been eaten or drunk. We throw it away because we cook or prepare too much or because we don't use it in time. This has an important environmental impact. Food that's thrown away and ends up in landfill isn't harmless, it breaks down and releases methane, a greenhouse gas. In the UK, we create more than 20m tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions from waste food – the same emissions as 3.5m cars. If global food waste was a country it would be the third-largest emitter of greenhouse gases after the US and China. We are doing this at a time when more and more families in the UK are going hungry and the demand for food from foodbanks is increasing. How easily we are tempted to waste what God has given us. How easily do we forget to share our good fortune.

Ironically part of the problem is that food is too cheap so we do not value it. We spend around 10% of our income on food compared with 40% or more in countries like Cameroon and Tanzania. In those countries, because food is comparatively expensive, very little is wasted. If we were prepared to pay

more for our food we would also be able to pay farmers a decent price for what they produce. 4 supermarket chains control 75% of the British food retail market so they can dictate the price farmers get for their products and so small scale farmers often struggle to survive. At the same time food is grown in developing countries on land that arguably should be used for feeding the local people. Seeing children with swollen bellies is a sad reminder of how little farmers in many developing countries are paid so that we can buy cheap food in the U.K.

However, the irony is that we have swollen bellies in the UK as well, but from a quite different cause. We stuff ourselves and our children with food high in carbohydrates so that we and they become obese, 62% of the UK population is overweight, and nearly 25% of adults are classed as obese. This means Britain has the 2nd highest rate of obesity in the world and the largest in Europe. This obesity epidemic is partly linked to poverty. Government figures show that 13% of 4-5 year olds from deprived areas are obese while 5% of 4-5 year olds from the least deprived areas are so affected. Sugar and fats are cheap fillers for processed foods and we know that we are all too easily tempted to eat these.

Why should this concern us? Well in purely financial terms we should be worried. £48 billion a year is spent managing the social causes and healthcare of obesity. There are 7 million cases of diabetes, 6.5 million cases of heart disease and stroke and 500,000 cancer cases linked to obesity. In short we are killing ourselves yet still we are tempted!

Ah, but we need to have cheap food so that those on low wages can eat, is the cry we hear. Yet food banks testify to the fact that increasingly many people **in work** cannot afford to feed their families. In the UK, more than 14 million people are living in poverty – including 4.5 million children, or nine children out of every classroom of 30.

In 2010 The Trussell Trust ran just 57 food banks giving 14,000 food parcels a year to children. Between April 2018 and March 2019, food banks in just the Trussell Trust network alone, provided a record 1.6 million food supplies to people in crisis, a 19% increase on the previous year. A third, of food bank

users were referred because they were on incomes so low they couldn't afford to feed their families.

As I've already mentioned, we do the same on a world scale. We underpay those that produce our food in developing countries so that we can enjoy our tea, coffee, chocolate and bananas at the lowest possible price. Multi-national companies make enormous profits on the backs of the poorest producers in the world by lobbying to ensure that the world trade rules are rigged in their and our favour. Prices are driven down ruthlessly as country is set against country in trade wars that benefit nobody but the richest. Brexit may be a chance to renegotiate trade agreements that benefit our own country and the poorer producers in developing countries. Of course, we may be more tempted to strike the trade deals that favour only our own interests. We shall have to wait and see.

This is where Fairtrade comes in. Fairtrade is now making a difference to 1.71 million farmers and workers in 75 developing countries, 23% of whom are women. Fairtrade is vital in helping people out of poverty and by buying Fairtrade goods, (and there are now over 6,000 to choose from), we are playing our part.

So, in a world full of temptation, can I finish by tempting us all away from the naughty and towards the nice? Can I tempt us this Lent to try to improve our relationship with the food God gives us? Could we, perhaps, plan more carefully so that we waste less food? Could we make sure that peelings and parts of plants that we don't eat are always composted? Could we try to avoid food packaged in plastic and lobby our supermarket to do away with it in the long term? Could we give a little more to the local food bank, while also writing to our MP to ask if the welfare system and wages could be at such a level that food banks became unnecessary? Could we improve our diets so that we are healthier? Could we ensure that whenever possible we buy locally produced food items directly from the farmer? And finally, could we ensure that we buy more Fairtrade items so that producers in developing countries get a fair deal for their hard work. If you haven't already started the Diocesan Lent Challenge this year, you may find that helpful in guiding you in these nice temptations. I would like us all to try to have a better relationship with the food God has given us so abundantly over the coming year.