

TRINITY 12 2009B...

CATHEDRAL EUCHARIST

SERMON

"Sit up straight!

Elbows off the table!

Napkin in your lap!

Wait until everyone has been served before you begin to eat!

...and close your mouth when you chew!"

I can remember it well!!!

The rituals associated with eating begin early in a child's life and grow more complex with our journey toward maturity.

There is that wonderful scene in the film 'Pretty Woman' where Julia Roberts, having been expertly schooled in the right and orderly use of cutlery before a posh dinner out, at said dinner, still manages to send a snail shell complete with snail winging its way towards a waiter and is deftly caught. 'Slippery little suckers'... she says! In every culture these rituals are one of the ways the "in" group holds itself apart from the "out" group.

Those who are like "us" eat the same foods in the same way "we" do.

Thos who are not like "us" don't!

Perhaps one of the more curious and exciting adventures we ever embark upon is our first awareness of these differences, the very first time we venture away from home to eat dinner with a family other than our own.

At their home can one get one's dessert without eating everything on the main course plate? As a child that would have been totally outside my experience!

What is that 'stuff' on the plate, anyway? Rollmop herrings stuffed with sauerkraut was the norm for a family with whom I had dinner in my second living. I was quite unable to eat it nor make the excuse of being full, as it was the first course!

So many differences define us: Is belching after dinner an expected compliment for the host or an embarrassment to your mother? Do they eat dinner with a fork, their fingers, or chopsticks?

The Urban Canon will tell you that his colleague the Canon Precentor often runs out of clerical shirts...usually because there are some vestiges of a recent lunch adorning the front of same, and they are now in the wash-bag precovered in Vanish stain-remover!!!

Though we can laugh at the mystery of our differences, when it comes to food, at the time the Gospels were written, food laws were a serious matter for Jews, and a divisive matter for the Church! The mission of the Church was in danger of being put wholly off track almost before it had started. St Paul, and those Gospel writers who nicely placed on the lips of Jesus this very matter, were absolutely convinced that this huge issue of identity should not impair the essential movement of the good news of the Gospel for all people.

But there were grave forces in opposition...

Many struggled to hold on to their identity after the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in AD70. Enforcing rules and regulations for maintaining purity was one way to maintain a sense of themselves as the people of Israel. Enforcing the food laws was one of several ways including the 'need' for circumcision, in which Jewish identity was held onto at all costs when the main pole of identity, the Temple had been destroyed.

At dinner I can hear my mother saying to me now but in the most loving of ways:

"We don't do that dear!"

But in the time of Jesus and the early Church this was writ large, very large indeed. It was God's commandment, after all, not unlike the admonishments of parents to "mind your manners and remember who you are" in the foreign land of a friend's home.

Listen up Israel, says Moses, to the Israelites. Folks will notice how you behave, and folks talk. Do what God tells you, and your upbringing will

honour God. They will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people."

But for Jesus the food laws became critical arguing points to challenge the exclusion of Gentiles from the kingdom of God. A new identity for Israel was unfolding and it required a shift in understanding the purpose of the law. Table manners are not after all meant for banishing to the basement those who aren't worthy enough to eat. They are meant to help make dining a pleasurable experience for everyone. Meals are most importantly about enabling all to feel part of a common 'ritual' and a common 'practice'. Meals should be a place where 'bonding' is central, and exclusive point-scoring at the expense of another is most definitely pushed aside.

But the controversy over food laws persisted, and in the early Church reflected tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christians that kept them from table fellowship together.

And have we changed and become more enlightened...well???

In this country it is still very hard for a confessing Anglican to receive communion in a Roman Catholic Church. For me, in a theological sense, and if you will excuse the pun this is extremely 'hard to swallow', not least for the reasons just spoken of.

When reasons for exclusion are challenged, people get scared. It feels as if their 'very existence' is threatened. And it is fear, ultimately, fear of a loss of identity that fuels the 'evil intentions of the heart.'

What defines us? Jesus perhaps might have said, it's not so much that "you are what you eat," but "what's eating you."

Jesus reassures us that what we need to worry about isn't whether we get the rituals exactly right... (and here is a liturgist talking!) What we need to reflect upon is how willing we are to reach out to the people across the street, who see things and do things differently from us.

We are to be doers of the word, and not merely "hearers who deceive themselves," James writes.

Jesus challenges us to see beyond the differences that threaten to isolate us from each other. He calls us to be together at the table, so that we might find we have more in common than our 'evil intentions.' Eucharist, coffee hours, pizza parties, picnics, cookouts and many other things

beyond outside the essentially eating circle -- we are called together to gather to at 'the table', whatever table, to remember that we all depend upon the grace of the One who loves us.

Here we come together again and again to give thanks and to be sent out once again humbled by that revelation. How do we show it forth... not only with our lips but in our lives? James suggests one specific practice: Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; Anger does not produce God's righteousness.

The story is told of a family and friends gathered for a special dinner that called for the best china and everyone's favourite recipes. All were seated at the table, waiting hungrily for the turkey to be served so dinner could begin. The proud cook strode through the doorway, the weight of the platter straining her grip, and she tripped on the carpet's edge. As she fell, the turkey slid across the floor.

There was a moment of dead silence before the hostess declared in a bright voice directed to the cook: "It's no problem, everything is all right. Just take that one back to the kitchen, and bring in the other one you prepared as back up." Of course, there was no second turkey. But the turkey, the same turkey reappeared, deftly realigned. Dinner was served.

Pure and undefiled religion has to do with loving and caring for others in distress, not stressing out over pure religious practices, which can at best be a distraction from 'the main theme' and at worst can become the most grievous of sins.

What makes us Christian is not ritual or customs, what we eat or what we fear. What defines us ultimately is our faith in the great redemptive love that calls us into being and commands that we be reconciled with one another. A common thread runs through the diversity of our response to that command.

As the old folk song proclaims "We are one in the spirit, we are one in the lord. They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love, they will know we are Christians by our love."