

## **Bread in the Wilderness**

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Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge

Sunday 1st March 2009

Isaiah 25.6-10.

Matthew 15 29-39.

When Sir Gregory Parsloe of Matchingham Hall got engaged to Miss Gloria Salt, she at once put him on a diet in order to convert an extremely fat man into that extremely thin one who, as both Orwell and Connolly have assured us, is in there signalling to get out.

Not surprisingly, the engagement fell through, and when it did so Sir Gregory “looked forward with bright anticipation to a meal of the sort that sticks to the ribs... Some men when jilted take to drink. Sir Gregory was taking to food. Freed from the thrall of Gloria Salt, he intended to make up for past privations” And this was the menu that he chose for himself:

Smoked Salmon, followed by Mushroom Soup, Filet of Sole, Hungarian Goulash, Asparagus with mayonnaise, Ambrosia Chiffon Pie, cheese, and Petits Fours.

Of course we are dwelling here in the world of fiction, in the world of P.G.Wodehouse, in the world of *Pigs Have Wings*. But such menus belong also to the world of fact. Had you been living in the year 1907 and were after a quick takeaway, you could have picked up the catalogue of the Army and Navy store in London and from it you could have ordered for yourself a 13 course dinner, including clear soup with custard shapes, and an ice which was made to look like a melon.

It seems, does it not, a very distant world -- but not so distant as all that. Only 15 years ago I remember the menu on Trinity High Table for Ash Wednesday, that day of solemn fasting: it was Scampi Amoureuse, Mignon d'Agneau au Porto and Strudel aux Cerises. A far cry surely from Ash Wednesday and Lent, that period during the

Christian year which we have just begun, when we are encouraged to follow the example of Jesus and go out into the wilderness to find whether God is trustworthy.

I know we often make a mistake and suppose that it was during those 40 days that Jesus was tested by the devil – those three temptations to turn stones into bread and so on. In fact, according to both Matthew and Luke, the three specific issues of contest with the devil came *after* the 40 days. In other words, the period of 40 days was a period of preparation for the greater conflicts that were to follow. Indeed, Matthew specifically says, “He fasted 40 days and 40 nights, and afterwards he was famished. Then the tempter came...”

Lent, therefore, in the imitation of Christ is a period of preparation, not of achievement. I know we often make it sound like achievement when we talk of 'giving something up for Lent', or indeed of 'taking something on'. But we are not Sir Gregory Parsloe, doing something for the sake of Miss Gloria Salt or her equivalent. We are ourselves, doing something for the sake of God.

So what should that be? What might we usefully 'give up' for Lent? And the answer to that is immediate and obvious: we should give up believing in God. Or at least, we should give up believing in God if in any way it seems to suggest that *we* are doing something for *God* – as though we are paying God the compliment of deciding whether we will or will not believe in him, as though our belief is a kind of examiner's mark of our approval.

Whereas God is there whether we approve of him or not. And therefore what we should *take on* for Lent is believing in God in a very different sense -- in the sense of being as simply and constantly as possible in the presence of God as an act of trust. For that is exactly what that period of preparation was for Jesus: he was learning what it means to live, without either evasion or distraction, in the constant presence of God in order to learn in that way whether God can indeed be trusted.

And that is the meaning of Lent, as it is indeed the fundamental meaning of prayer. What we do in Lent and what we do in prayer is not looking at a menu and deciding what to eat or what not to eat; it is not looking at what is on offer and deciding what

we choose to do about it, like making clear soup with custard shapes. Lent and prayer are not about our deciding to do something for God, they are about God doing everything for us.

Lent, like prayer, is learning to receive God and to be with God – exactly like those people gathered for three days on a hillside in Galilee. Do you imagine they were there to discuss a menu? ‘I say, haven’t you got anything beside fish?’ They were there because they wanted simply to be where Christ is, there where all hunger is satisfied and all healing takes place, where fault and failure are forgiven, where the dumb speak and the blind see, where the lame walk and the maimed and the broken are made whole.

*They* do nothing about it. They do not catch the fish, nor do they bake the bread. They toil not, neither do they spin: they receive everything from God because they are simply there in the presence of God: “and they praised the God of Israel”; and that is all.

And exactly the same is true also of Isaiah's great vision of God’s magnificent meal at the end of time, “a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow”. For there too the people invited do absolutely nothing. They don’t even do the washing-up. They come where God has invited them to be, there where death is swallowed up for ever and the tears are wiped away from every face.

That surely is the lesson we need to learn for Lent, that we need to get ourselves where God is to receive what God offers. And since God is everywhere – God is always present to us -- we need, not to *get*, but simply learn to be where God is. The practice of being in the presence of God is not like learning any other human achievement – that if you try hard enough you will produce an ice made to look like a melon.

Certainly, of course, there are many things that you can usefully learn about prayer, and you would be wise to learn them, and Lent is a good time for that learning. But the purpose is not in order to make yourself into someone who is good at prayer. If you do that, so what? Custard shapes in clear soup.

Nothing is of any worth unless it helps you to bring yourself, or simply to be yourself, with God. Give God space to be with you in your life. Lent therefore is sitting on a hillside in Galilee or in this Chapel or in your room in order to love the One who loves you -- the one who gives you everything because he gives you himself: he took the bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it – gave it, not just to a few in an upper room in Jerusalem, not just to four or five thousand in Galilee, but to a vast multitude:

“This is for you and for many”: *huper pollon*, in Greek, for many, indeed for the *hoi polloi*, the same word in Greek: is that phrase still used? *Hoi polloi*, all those ordinary people out there, the great crowd of ordinary undistinguished people, including you. *Hoi polloi*, *huper pollon*, this gift, this feast, is not just for a privileged few but for a vast, immense crowd of ordinary and surely for the most part extremely undistinguished people – but people who are now made distinguished and distinct because, in that vast multitude of all the holy people of God, this is given for you.

What can we do except receive the gift, hold the gift of God in our hands, and say, 'My Lord and my God' and say it in deepest, deepest love. Prayer in the end is a response of love to the love of God, who, as I John puts it, first loved us. That is what Lent is about: waiting on a hillside with God.

Do you remember those words in Isaiah? “It will be said on that day, Look, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

But for us it is no longer *that* day in some distant future: it is *this* day, today and every day: look, this is our God. Prayer is joining with God in a life-giving meal, not of the sort that sticks to the ribs, but rather of the sort that fills us and the whole earth with the goodness and the grace and the glory of God.

For you remember how the story in the gospel ends? No, not gathering up the broken pieces left over. It ends with him sending away the crowds, after which he got into a boat, and he went to the region of Magadan. Of which we know nothing.

Having just written an atlas of the Holy Land, I can tell you for sure that there is no mention anywhere of a place called Magadan - and for that reason some manuscripts of the New Testament simply change the name from Magadan to Dalmanutha or to Magdala, the place from which Mary Magdalene came.

But if we stay with the original Magadan and do not change it, it means in Greek something like, the place where beautiful music is played; in Aramaic or Hebrew, it means a most precious object.

And that too is the meaning of prayer. To be in the presence of God, to be with God, is a response of love to an act of love, looking for nothing beyond itself. Yes.

But only then in order that you also may get in your boat or your car, get on your bike, and go; go where you are still and always most precious to God, and where the beautiful music of God's real presence can be played in the detail of your life. You may not hear it yourself, but others around you most certainly will, because you will have been changed.

So by all means, during Lent, gather up the broken pieces, gather up the experience of your life so far and ask for God's mercy and blessing upon it, but then go - go to become in your most precious life the place where music of great beauty is played by God, that you in your turn may love and serve others, and may give praise and honour and thanksgiving to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and for ever, Amen.