

Trinity College Cambridge
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The Seven Deadly Sins: Gluttony
Numbers 11: 1–20 John 6: 22–38

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From the eleventh chapter of the Book of Numbers:
'When the dew fell on the camp at night, the manna fell with it.' (11: 9)

May all our thoughts and words and deeds be begun, continued and ended in the faith of the most blessed Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A student asked me recently, 'Why should there be seven deadly sins? Aren't there more sins than that? Why even try to make a list?' Caught off guard (every now and then a student asks a question that no one has asked before and which you've never thought to ask yourself), my instinct was to reply that the list has a certain logic, such that sins not on it turn out to be specific forms of the sins that are. (This was a wild shot in the dark: I had no idea at the time whether I could back up this claim if challenged to show how some obscure form of wrongdoing was in fact a form of one of the seven). Whether or not there are just seven root sins, the list does have a logic, a logic that emerges when we consider the relation of sins on it to each other. We can learn about gluttony, for example, by asking how it differs from greed.

Greed is about possession. If there is an archetypal greedy person, perhaps it is the nameless monarch in the children's song 'Four and twenty blackbirds': the royal household is going about its usual business: the maid is hanging out the clothes, the queen partaking of her snack of bread and honey, and the king is in his counting house, counting out his money. Why would he need to count it? Surely he has some sort of chamberlain to look after expenses, tracking what goes in and out of the royal treasury, and some magnificently-liveried guard to watch over it? It would seem he just likes counting it, for the joy of handling his money and reminding himself how much he has. There is your classic miser: someone who enjoys the sheer fact of having and accumulating more.

Contrast the glutton. The glutton doesn't want to have, because in its classic forms of excessive eating and drinking, gluttony entails the disappearance of what the glutton cherishes. It vanishes, because the glutton is someone who enjoys, not the sheer fact of possessing, but the sheer act of consumption. The glutton is then the opposite of the miser: the miser doesn't want to spend, lest it deplete his hoard; the glutton won't preserve, lest he not have the pleasures of consumption.

Stated this way, though, gluttony might clearly be about more than excessive eating and drinking. It had better be, if we want to claim that gluttony is some sort of root sin. Eating and drinking too much can't be, even in the overly-padded Western world, of itself

so very fundamental a form of wrongdoing. For a start, it's hard to specify exactly why eating and drinking too much would be sinful. If we bracket the fact that those who drink too much alcohol become prone to other sins (the problem here isn't gluttony itself, but the specific substance which is overindulged), then we have to ask who is harmed by excessive eating and drinking. Gluttons themselves, in the sense that they damage their own health? But one can damage one's health just as much by undereating or eating an unbalanced diet or by not taking any exercise. Perhaps one's neighbour is damaged, then? There is no evidence, however, that the excess food eaten by the overeater is what deprives the hungry of their portion: the problem of world hunger, we are told, is not a problem of there not being enough food to go around, but of waste and improper distribution.

Maybe God is the injured party: could God be offended by the sheer fact of excessive quaffing? Do the divine sensibilities shrink from the evident effects of excess: sumo wrestlers with their phenomenal tonnage, on full display because of their incongruously nappy-like attire; or someone like the now-departed tenor, Luciano Pavarotti, who had to travel with a luxurious customised portapotty because he was too gargantuan to fit on ordinary toilets. Such spectacles no doubt inspire distaste in many of us—but is *God* offended? Does it make sense to think of God as a kind of cosmic fashion-magazine editor who simply likes to see his creatures lean and lanky? If gluttony is a sin, its distastefulness, its unpalatableness, can't rest on its consequences, in the form of excess flesh, or God would also disdain those of his creatures whose excess flesh comes about as the result of some disorder, rather than simple overeating or drinking. The human body is God's handiwork and God despises nothing he has made, nothing whatsoever. God detests *sin*, but sin is not God's doing.

The sinfulness of gluttony cannot lie in the effects of excess on the body, then. Its root must be that of all sin, some form of rejection of God. To find the connection between that rejection and consumption we can do no better than to turn back to the most sustained account of human rejection of God, and God's response to rejection: the Bible. Consider the story from tonight's reading from the Book of Numbers: after centuries of slavery in Egypt and after long, senseless wrangling with Egypt's dunce of a leader, Pharaoh, the children of Israel finally escape Egypt, cross the Red Sea, and find themselves in the wilderness. They are led purposefully, unexpectedly, by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, eloquent signs of God's abiding presence with them. In the middle of the desert, with no natural means of sustenance to hand, they are fed with manna, a substance they have evidently never encountered before (it is identified only by what it resembles: coriander seed and bdellium). Whatever it is, exactly, it is always to hand when it should be, takes little effort to gather and prepare, and when cooked, tastes like 'cakes baked with oil', which presumably means it tastes good, at least to palates of this particular culture. It's an ancient Israelite convenience food, with no risk of being contaminated with horsemeat: truly a Godsend.

The reaction of the people is however not what one might have expected under the circumstances. After the forced hard labour in Egypt, where they were beaten and their children slaughtered, the Israelites are now smitten with nostalgia for the earthly paradise they were once so eager to leave: 'We remember the fish we ate in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and garlic'. In the midst of freedom and divinely-supplied plenty, suddenly they're longing for the good old days of slavery.

The root problem here is not that melons and leeks are more appealing than manna. One suspects that if melons were supplied, there would be complaints about those, too. The point is that the people are in the middle of a wilderness where their daily needs are supplied mysteriously, with only one day's supply arriving at a time. When they disregard divine instruction and try to hoard the manna, it rots. This arrangement is God's way of teaching them to trust, to trust that each day's need will be supplied, without their having to do anything other than collect and cook it, yet trust is exactly what they seem to be unable to do, hence the sudden hankering for onions and garlic.

It is this episode in the history of Israel of which Jesus reminds those who doggedly follow him across the Sea of Galilee. He has been at the centre of another feeding miracle: after speaking to the thousands who followed him into the middle of nowhere and who were then stranded without food, he asked God's blessing on what little food there was to hand, and miraculously, the little was enough for all. Now these same miraculously-nourished people are asking for signs, assurances that if they trusted in Jesus, their trust would be justified. They have roundly missed the point, have completely failed to understand that Jesus has *already* shown them he can fulfil their needs. Their demand for a sign now, after what they have just seen, only shows how oblivious they are, how lacking in trust. Any further sign would be pointless: they were just given a sign and failed to grasp what it was. Just how many signs do they need?

Jesus responds this time, not by performing another miracle, but by pointing to the greatest miracle of all: that of the Word's becoming flesh, giving himself for the life of the world. 'I am', he says, 'the bread of life and the one who comes to me shall not hunger'. If the people had understood the feeding miracle, they would have grasped that what they were being given was not an impromptu picnic in the wilderness, but the everlasting love of someone who can fulfil their every need, someone who could supply both their bodily needs, and every aching lack in their hearts. Jesus' words offer his hearers this fullness, but his offer is also to us, those who were not there when the loaves were multiplied, we who did not make our way through the Sinai desert, fed by manna that dropped like the dew from heaven.

In the case of both the people of Israel in the wilderness and thousands who followed Jesus into the countryside there is satisfaction of reasonable material need: the Israelites have not been led out of Egypt to perish in the desert, the crowds did not follow Jesus just so they could faint from hunger in deserted countryside. None of them has been in danger of any kind of material lack, but despite the material provision—literally, out of nowhere—they don't learn to be thankful for what they have and for all God has done for them. In the midst of blessing and plenty, they are clamouring for superfluous signs and whining about missing leeks. Even Jesus' closest disciples fail to grasp that he will give them all they need, their material needs, and more as well.

Neither the people of Israel nor the crowds Jesus feeds nor his immediate disciples could be described as gluttons, *per se*: there is no suggestion in either narrative that these people want to gorge themselves. But both the children of Israel and the people who pursue Jesus after the feeding of the thousands have failed to turn their gaze from their bodies' legitimate needs to the Giver of all good gifts. Consumption has become an end in itself.

The failure to recognise that what one receives is a gift, ends as the refusal of the blessings of sufficiency. The one who fails to recognise the gift ends up also neglecting to thank the Giver, failing to see that thankfulness need not be a sign of sullen dependency, but of a joy-filled intimacy.

The root of gluttony, then, could be thought of as a kind of thoughtlessness. Put that way, the salutary antidote is not a diet, or even carefully-calculated moderation. The true cure for excessive, unthinking consumption is a certain kind of extravagance, a life lived from a centre of overflowing thankfulness, and the generosity this thankfulness will of its own accord propagate.

This evening, if you are dining in Hall, you will hear a grace said before dinner. If you would avoid the glutton's dim-wittedness, instead of letting the Latin wash over you, try thanking God from the bottom of your heart, not only for the blessing of this dinner, but for the blessing of having enough food on a daily basis; thank God for all the good in your life: the blessings of the friends and companions around you, who share this meal and share your life; the blessings of shelter and warmth; of the food this college gives your mind, as well as your body. You might even try to remember to thank God before other meals, when no one else is saying grace.

Out of the thankfulness for what you have received, respond to the world of blessings around you with the generosity born of glad awareness of what you yourself have received: do some kindness for those who have less. The season of Lent, in which we now find ourselves, is most often associated with abstinence, and abstaining from at least some forms of food and drink has always been part of its life-giving discipline. By tradition, though, it is equally a time of almsgiving. Consider, if you would avoid the perils of the glutton's heedlessness of blessing, making a donation to charity. Try giving a little more than you think you can afford, you who after all, have so much. In a spirit of thankfulness for the unduly large proportion of the world's resources which you as an inhabitant of the industrialised West consume, try to consume less: try this Lent to take greater care with the electricity you use, for example, to waste less, so that your consumption does not mean that others will inhabit a world stripped bare of its natural resources.

You may not feel you have ever experienced anything like the discovery of manna in the desert, or the multiplication of loaves in the wilderness, but it is a piece of extraordinary good fortune, to say the least, that you and I have been well fed, well housed, well clothed and well educated, when much of the world lives at or below the poverty line. You and I have in fact experienced manna. We can live in the midst of plenty like the children of Israel, sulking because we haven't exactly what we think we need, or we can live in thankfulness, with hearts whose gratitude overflows in generosity towards others and acknowledgement of the Giver of all good gifts.

The deadly element of gluttony is forgetfulness of blessing, and ultimately, forgetfulness of God. The words of Jesus Christ call us to our senses: 'I am the bread of life; the one who believes in me will never hunger'. To acknowledge our blessings is to see, with opened eyes, the manna that is all around us, falling on our lives as softly and as surely as the dew of heaven.