

St Edmunds and St Matthews – 6th March 2022 – 1st Sunday of Lent

Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Luke 4:1-13

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Today I am going to talk about something we are all familiar with – food! Whether we are superb cooks, pick at our meals or frankly eat too much – we all know about it. Can I just point out that despite the rumours of my chocolate obsession, when we visited Bournville a few months ago, I chose going to the bookshop over the chocolate factory!

In our Old Testament reading from the book of Deuteronomy today, a basket of food is the subject of much discussion. The people chosen by God, after wandering in the wilderness for forty years, have at last been admitted to a land of milk and honey, the promised land where there is plenty compared with the shortages felt in the desert, where they were totally dependent on God's direct provision. In order to say thank you to God for bringing them to the first place for a generation where they were safe and could grow their own food, they are asked to bring their first fruits, the first of their crops to the altar to honour God.

If you have ever managed to grow anything in your garden that you can eat it is a special feeling. Even if you are the sort of gardener who has accidental crops like apples (so many apples!), rhubarb or wild strawberries, you know how important that food is. Hannah has just begun an allotment share, and Peter was moved to go and dig a large section over the other day. I offered to mark out a section of the Vicarage garden and call it an allotment, but he didn't seem keen. Hannah seems to be planting unpronounceable things that I wouldn't know how to harvest let alone cook, so we shall see.

Like many people I have been watching the Ukraine coverage on the television news. I watched a lone woman who had been travelling to the Polish border for days without eating and was finally tucking into a container of hot food. It was only when she was being interviewed that she found out that she was across the border and was safe. Safety and food, a modern celebration of what the Israelites had found. We have seen women and children, the elderly and so many more being grateful for the basics of life after leaving everything behind. Another lot of refugees, that are at the moment not welcome in the UK according to the government's rules.

We don't offer food at the altar today – except perhaps at harvest, but we can be grateful for what we have, whether we go to the supermarket ourselves, depend on friends or family, or have a fig covered van driven by Jake, Robert or Daniel panicking about our drive. We do however have foodbanks across our country which have to have stocks of food for those who cannot afford to buy it for their families. The necessary announcement is that it is this Sunday in our churches that we are collecting for a local food bank – and you can leave stuff in Primrose's book shed at the Vicarage until Tuesday morning.

It is a shame that certain politicians have rejoiced in how well foodbanks are doing, without remembering how sad it is that they have to exist at all. I remember in about 2012 we had to start having food parcels available at the Citizen's Advice Bureau where I worked. Not something you would want if you had any choice.

Food is important through out the Bible, a point of celebration or upset. It is mentioned in our Gospel reading today. Luke tells us of Jesus' withdrawal into the wilderness as he thinks about the mission he is about to begin. It is a memorable length of time – forty days like the forty symbolic years the Israelites spent in the wilderness hundreds of years before. We are told that he has not eaten – he was famished. My dad used to say he was so hungry he could eat a horse and chase the rider. So, when the devil tells him to turn the stones around him into bread, it must have been very tempting. Firstly, so he could eat again, bite into fresh bread, eat his fill. Also, it would show that he was indeed the Son of God – a relationship he must have known about on some level, but perhaps had considered and thought about so much that he was daunted by it on some level. He refuses – One cannot live by bread alone – he says, it is written. He knows that while food is important, there is so much more to life – hope, faith, love – that merely feeding his body with food is not enough.

In total Jesus is tested three times by the Devil. Offered all the power over the entire world, offered the opportunity to test that God will save him. This must have been an important story for those who first heard it, first read it, as they would have been aware of the temptation in the Garden of Eden story. Jesus is shown as a new type of Messiah, without worldly ambition, without needing the Devil's validation of his role. In a world where political ambition can be so destructive, this is a lesson worth remembering.

Food is vital to life, and we perhaps forget that we are among the first generations of people in this country to have access to such a huge variety provided we can afford it. We can have literally hundreds of items brought to our door, we can go and look in a supermarket where there will be thousands of alternatives. There are dozens of recipes online or in books. We can have boxes of all the ingredients we need for a meal delivered to our door, or ready made meals ready to microwave. So many adverts on the television are for food, even though they are limited in certain hours, as well as diets. My daughter pointed out that I give books to people as a way of communication, but so many people use food in the same ways, I'm glad to say, as we are often recipients of cake and other delicacies.

Part of our relationship with food is sharing it with others, expressing our joy at being together especially at the moment, when being able to eat indoors with family and friends is so enjoyable after being apart for so long. That's true whether it's lunch, dinner or a rather nice afternoon tea – we were almost asked to move on after taking hours over one a few months ago! We cook for ourselves and other people, and we express the nature of our relationship in a way. It is perhaps another reason we think it's important to donate food to those in need expressing our desire to help.

Our readings today express how our relationship with God can include so many elements, not simply prayer but also sharing food with others, sharing the gifts we have been given. Some people traditionally give up certain foods for Lent, which can make us a bit more miserable or at least less happy. I think at this stage we perhaps need not deny ourselves considering the challenges we have been through and continue to worry us. So, this Lent, let us think about our relationship with food, find some quiet joy in eating it ourselves, but also be willing to share with others as a perhaps more obvious joy. Through that we can think about our relationship with God, and about how that can bring us joy in every way. Amen.