

HOMILY
11th October 2020

Dear Friends,

I find it interesting how often conversations come round to talking about food - favourite dishes, likes and dislikes, different ways of cooking. People clearly find it a most engrossing subject, and I think one of the reasons is that food does not just provide the nutrition we need to go on living, but is a major ingredient in the celebrations we keep to bring joy and delight to our living. Sharing a meal with other people is always a celebration of our common humanity as creatures made by God to enjoy the gifts of his creation. A wise rabbi said that when you get to heaven God will only have one question to ask you, 'Did you enjoy my creation?'

It is no wonder, therefore, that food and feasting play a big part in our religious observances - this is probably true of all the great world religions. Our Christian faith comes out of Judaism, in which alongside public ceremonies there is the domestic liturgy, the Passover feast or the weekly Sabbath celebrated at home with the family gathered and rituals followed to enhance the occasion, and where the various kinds of food used have a special religious significance - unleavened bread, for example, to remember the first Passover, bitter herbs to recall the time of suffering from which God sets us free.

The Acts of the Apostles tells us that the first followers of Jesus, who were of course all Jewish, went regularly to the temple for the public prayers, but also 'broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous heart, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.' The breaking of bread is a term for the Eucharist, the essential distinguishing act of Christian worship in which we remember how Christ at the Last Supper gave a new meaning to the Passover feast by offering the bread and wine as his body and blood, the means by which God shares his very own life with us his people - and in remembering we make present again the sacrifice of Christ, so that we receive now the self-same Christ, the crucified Saviour who is also our risen Lord. His life is renewed in us as we join the feast of his Passover.

There has been some controversy over the changes made to the words of our Mass when the current version came in about ten years ago, replacing the one in

use since the 1970s. The words of Christ over the cup of wine, my blood which 'will be shed for you and for *all*' has become 'will be poured out for you and for *many*.' The reason given for this change is that the Greek word in the Gospels from where the text comes (pollon) means many rather than all, but we might note that the word itself has a sense of the generality of people, as in our expression hoi polloi. At any rate it would be unthinkable to imagine that we are now restricting the scope of Christ's self-offering: he gives himself, as he always has, for the salvation of the whole of humanity, not just a select group.

This becomes very clear when we look at the parable in this Sunday's Gospel, where a king holds a wedding feast for his son. When those invited do not turn up he sends his servants to gather in anyone they can find from the highways and byways. Everyone is invited to the king's banquet, including those some would judge to be unworthy of it. You can reject the invitation if you choose, but in doing so you condemn yourself to a diminishment of your humanity. This may be the meaning of the curious detail at the end of the parable where someone is spotted at the feast not wearing a wedding garment and the king orders him to be thrown out into the dark. In Jewish thinking a wedding garment was an image of generosity of spirit. To receive what God wants to give us we must respond by giving of ourselves. The Mass is always the Mass, it "works" no matter what we think about it - because it is the action of God; but if we do not respond it will have no effect for us. Outward signs must produce an inner spiritual response if they are to make a difference to us. Much depends, therefore, on the attitudes and motivation we bring to our receiving of God's gifts and which are then seen in how we serve him.

One of the Scriptures we had last week was the story of Martha and Mary, the two sisters of Lazarus and personal friends of Jesus (Luke 10: 38-42). When Jesus comes to call on them Martha busies herself sweeping the house clean, setting the table with the best crockery and cutlery, cooking a tasty meal. When the Son of God comes calling at your house you naturally want to do your best for him and I imagine he would enjoy good hospitality and fine food as much as anyone - and if these things are to be provided somebody has to do the work! It will not just happen of its own accord. Martha's sister Mary by contrast apparently does nothing, she simply sits and listens to Jesus. We say nothing, but if you have ever tried to give your full, whole-hearted attention in listening to another person, you will know that this can be hard work! Parents especially will know that they can buy their children all sorts of expensive toys and treats, but what will matter most

is the loving attention they give to their children: it can even be easier just to buy them costly gifts, rather than spend time and effort in attending to them.

Jesus does seem to be rather offhand in the way he speaks to Martha. He says to her, 'You are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her.' Mysterious words - what could they mean? To be distracted means to be drawn in different directions and lack focused concentration. Maybe this is the case with Martha. Why is she so busy? Is it out of genuine regard and love for another, or is it to be thought well of for herself, so that people will say, 'Isn't she wonderful, so good doing all that work while her lazy sister sits there doing nothing?' Elsewhere in the Gospels Jesus says that if you make a parade of your good works you will get your reward in the approval of others, but what really counts is how God sees you - and he sees more in secret, inwardly, than in the outward appearance.

Our activity in the service of God, therefore, needs to be centered above all on him, and then it will go well and bear fruit. It is not a matter of either/or - activity or listening, but giving priority to our listening to God so that our actions will flow from there. Anything we can do by way of listening to God - prayer and worship, reading the Scriptures, sitting in silence - will always be time well spent.

The American Franciscan Richard Rohr runs what he calls a Centre for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico. In a talk once I heard him say that people often ask which is the most important word in your title. His answer is, 'The most important word in our title is the word *and*!'

With all best wishes and prayers, Fr. Robin (robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk).