

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 1st February 2015 11am

Education Sunday

Deuteronomy 18: 15-20

Psalm 111

1 Cor 8: 1-13

Mark 1: 21-28

Muesli from Holland and Barratt, soaked overnight in freshly squeezed apple juice with a hint of ginger.

Served with a dollop of Yeo Valley organic yoghurt and a drizzle of honey.

You are what you eat.

So I do wonder what my usual breakfast menu says about me...

On Tuesday I attended the Marylebone Interfaith Scriptural Reasoning group.

Rabbis, Imams, Priests, scholars, and interested people from Judaism, Islam and Christianity meet regularly to study their sacred texts together.

On Tuesday we met at the Al-Khoei Foundation in Kilburn to study Muslim, Jewish and Christian attitudes towards dietary laws.

I was delighted to discover that the Koran endorses my breakfast!

And your Lord inspired to the bee: 'Take for yourself among the mountains, houses, and among the trees... then eat from all the fruits and follow the ways of your Lord...'

There emerges from their bellies a drink, varying in colours, in which there is healing for people.

Indeed in that is a sign for a people who give thought.'

Surat Al-Nahl: 68-69

Honey.

The breakfast choice for thoughtful people.

Much of our discussion on Tuesday was about why.

Why have rules about food in the first place?

Is it just good health and safety practice for a desert-living people?

Rabbi Chaim Weiner was very interesting on this topic.

Eating is a core human activity, he said.

It's not as though those who don't follow strict kosher or halal laws don't care what they eat.

Look at the Sunday papers.

They are full of dietary laws.

How to eat organic.

Avoid fat.

Sugar is bad for you.

Processed foods contain way too much salt.

Make sure your diet contains superfoods.

Blueberries, is it, this month?

Actually I noticed in yesterday's paper it was freshly squeezed beetroot juice.

And of course, we have our own Fair Trade stall each week.

Our food laws, spoken or unspoken, whether or not they claim to come from a deity, or from the health gurus of our society, or from our Joint Public Issues Team, say something important about our moral and ethical stance.

Think of all the contentious arguments in recent months about the diet of families on benefits.

What you eat can pack a heavy judgemental punch.

In my discussion group on Tuesday, I was asked – what are the Christian dietary rules?

I must confess that for a moment I was stumped.

What are they?

I'll come back to what I said at the end of this sermon.

The Reverend Stephen Stavrou from Southwark Cathedral chose as his text the passage from Acts 10 where Peter has a vision of a sheet lowered from heaven containing all kinds of animals, birds and reptiles.

He is shocked when a voice tells him to kill and eat.

No way, Peter says.

Medamos.

I've never eaten unkosher food.

But the voice insists.

What God has made clean, you must not call profane.

Perhaps what characterises a Christian approach to food is freedom.

Liberation.

Christ has freed us from being enslaved to rules that define tribal belonging.

We can eat whatever we like.

This is the issue Paul is wrestling with in his letter to the church at Corinth.

Some Christians from the Corinthian church have asked Paul whether it's OK to eat meat offered to idols.

In Roman cities around 50 CE, the only meat available for sale in the markets was the meat left over after sacrifices at the various Temples.

The market was right in the centre of the Temple complex for that very reason.

And the big, important, social feasts, where you networked your way into high status friendships and business relationships – the meat served there was bound to be from the temple too.

So to refuse meat was to exclude yourself from civic life.

These socially and theologically competent Corinthians know perfectly well that there are no such things as idols.

They are not real gods.

So what does it matter what we eat?

Christ has set us free from that kind of petty rule-keeping.

Paul takes this question, and this line of reasoning, as a starting place for a meditation on how we make decisions on any moral and ethical issue.

How do we live a holy life in the middle of an aggressively secular society?

How do we act with integrity?

How do we choose a course of action that will honour God and our neighbour?

Some of the Corinthian church are clearly used to taking it for granted that they know the answer.

Of course idols are a figment of the imagination.

Of course it can't matter if we eat meat sacrificed to idols.

Of course we shouldn't sabotage our social life and our foodie preferences for the sake of a few squeamish concerns.

But Paul makes it clear that those who are so sure of what is right – who claim to have 'knowledge' – can't simply ride roughshod over everyone else.

Some people do have black and white convictions, loud voices, an assumption that they know the truth.

But that doesn't necessarily make them right.

Knowledge puffs up, says Paul.

Love builds up.

What matters is that the decisions we make reflect the nature of the God we serve. And build up the community of Christ.

We cannot separate our faith from the actions of our everyday lives.

So the food we choose to eat, the clothes we choose to buy, the way we choose to vote – all of life must be lived in the light of what we believe about God.

And in the light of how our choices affect others.

What kind of example are we setting?

How will our actions encourage – or undermine – the faith of those who are less secure in their freedom?

All three of our readings today wrestle with the nature of authority.

How do we evaluate the many conflicting voices that tell us what to eat, how to vote, who we should be?

What God is like?

As we move inexorably towards the general election in May, these are important questions.

Last week I read about a website called *vote for policies.org*

You select a topic – welfare, education, the NHS, immigration – and the website gives you six sets of anonymised policies.

You choose the set that most fits with your beliefs, and then move on to the next topic.

At the end, the site tells you which party you support.

Brilliant!

That takes all the effort out of my decision!

So I did this with six topics.

At the end, I found my vote split equally between three different political parties.

So that was no good.

I shall still have to wrestle with how to cast my vote.

But who should influence my choice?

The arguments in the last couple of weeks about political TV debates make it clear that politicians and the BBC all believe that personalities influence us heavily.

Should Nigel Farage be given a national TV platform?

Are people tempted to vote for UKIP because he is such an engaging personality?

Will people vote for David Cameron because he is smooth and charming?

Or run a mile because he is an Old Etonian?

Are people more or less likely to vote for Ed Milliband because he eats a bacon sarnie in a slightly odd way?

Just as Paul is aware in Corinth that the bigger personalities and the louder voices can have undue influence;

So the book of Deuteronomy considers what sort of governance will best protect the people of Israel from over-assertive characters.

Today's passage comes from a longer section in chapters 16, 17 and 18, which sets out the checks and balances that a healthy society needs.

Judges must be appointed by the community.
They must not accept bribes or show partiality.
No doubt the people will want a King, once they settle down from their nomadic wanderings.
But the king mustn't acquire too many horses or too many wives or too much silver and gold.
Wealth distorts power.

Priests have a vital role in the life of the people.
But they should have no allotment or inheritance.
Don't get too comfortable, you religious leaders.
Too settled.
God is your foundation.

Prophets, too, are part of that balanced community.
Prophets speak truth to power.

Judges, kings, priests, prophets – you need to have all of these working together, in order to balance community life.

But today's lectionary passage from Deuteronomy 18 recognises that prophets tend to be charismatic characters.
Eloquent speakers.
They have the power to sway their hearers with their claims to have the word of God.
How do we know whether to trust them?

Which brings us back to our original question.
How do we discern which prophets speak the truth?
Where does authority lie?
Who do we listen to?
How do we discern which people should guide our decisions?

Appropriately, on Education Sunday, one thing we are asked to do is to use our minds.
There are no simple rules for deciding who to listen to.
What we can eat, or who we can eat it with.
How we should behave, or who we should vote for.
We need to read and think and reflect and weigh and balance all that we know.

So in Deuteronomy, the writer challenges the people to ask whether the prophets are speaking in the tradition of Moses.
Does what they say accord with the principles and the rules they have inherited?

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul challenges his readers to think about the effect of their decisions on the community?

Is this about building each other up in love?

So that is one approach to deciding about our political affiliations, for example.

How do different party's manifestos accord with our faith traditions?

Will their policies build up our communities in love?

But I think it's more complicated than that.

It's not just about how we make our minds up about who to vote for.

It's about how we speak with authority in the different contexts of our lives.

How do we discern a place to stand with integrity on many complex moral and ethical and political issues?

How do we find our own prophetic voice?

In Mark's gospel, we are challenged to look directly at the life and ministry of Jesus for an answer.

According to Deuteronomy, the people demanded prophets because they were afraid to face God directly.

If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.

But in Jesus, once and for all, God finds a way to speak to us directly, in a life we can recognise because it is visibly human.

In today's lectionary passage from Mark's gospel, what impresses the watching crowd is that Jesus speaks with authority.

He teaches them in the synagogue – not like the scribes.

He seems to know what he is talking about.

And not just what he is talking about.

His words are matched by his actions.

A man with an unclean spirit is healed.

The demon is cast out.

Jesus doesn't just talk about the power of God.

And the love of God.

He enacts it.

He embodies it.

But Jesus himself doesn't have an easy answer when it comes to the issue of authority.

We note that the man possessed by a demon is healed on the Sabbath.

Stick to the rules, or prioritise the human factor?

Jesus is fully aware of the tension between respect for the law and tradition he has inherited, and the human needs of the people he encounters.

It is the tension between the message of Deuteronomy, and the message of Paul.
This issue will bring Jesus into a life and death confrontation with the religious authorities.

And the way he deals with it is not to create another set of rules.

Rules for choosing between competing rules!

His solution is to simply live it out.

To be so deeply embedded in the love of God, that he cannot help but live and speak and act out of that love.

To make enough time for quiet prayer and reflection, and simply being with God, that he cannot help but be embedded in that love.

That is the authority out of which he speaks and heals and acts.

So how do we get in touch with that authority?

Both to make decisions about which authorities to trust?

And to be able to speak and act and live with authority ourselves?

This brings me back, finally, to the question I was asked on Tuesday at the Scriptural reasoning group.

What are the Christian rules about food?

What I said was this.

We don't have any rules about what items you can and can't eat.

But at the heart of our worship is a sacrament about food.

But it's about more than food.

It's about accepting God's invitation to the feast of the kingdom.

It's about welcoming everyone to the table.

It's about embodying radical hospitality.

By making this sharing of food the centre of our worship, we are invited to create a habit of receiving from God, and sharing with others.

And to create that habit not by committing to a set of rules, or by reading a book, but by learning it in our bodies.

And we learn it in our bodies by regularly doing something both very ordinary, and very intimate – taking bread, blessing it, breaking it, eating it.

Then we live it out.

Because it is in the ordinary and intimate acts of our everyday embodied lives that we learn what God we serve.

And show that God to others.

Amen.