

Taste and see

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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I Kings 19.4-8; Psalm 34.1-8; John 6.35, 41-51

Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Do any of us like vampire movies? I certainly don't. To most of us the very thought of drinking someone's blood is revolting and the eating of human flesh is disgusting.

Small wonder then that Jesus' Jewish hearers were taken aback when he told them to eat his flesh and—in the verses following this morning's reading—to drink his blood. 'Eater of flesh' was an Aramaic title for the Devil. To consume blood was against God's law. Even some of Jesus' own followers left him because of this saying.

Yet the people of the ancient world, Jews and Gentiles alike, were familiar with animal sacrifice. In many of the pagan religions, when flesh was offered to a god, they believed that the god entered into the meat, so that a worshipper who ate the meat ate the god and was god-filled. Perhaps that's why the Council of Jerusalem urged newly converted Gentiles not to eat food that had been offered to idols.

John's early readers would have understood the longing of worshipers to identify with their particular god and to take the god into them. They wouldn't have taken the eating of Jesus' flesh literally to mean a gory human sacrifice.

Just as in Jesus' parables, we have to wrestle with this as a picture, a metaphor, a symbol. These words of Jesus point to a spiritual encounter that is hard to describe in human language.

Verse eight of this morning's psalm helps us: "*O taste and see that the Lord is good: happy are they that hide in him!*"

Taste the Lord, it says. Scriptures uses all the senses to describe experience of God: sight, hearing, smell, touch and, yes, taste.

Hebrews: "We have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come." (6.5)

1 Peter: "You have tasted that the Lord is good." (2.2-3)

Psalm 119: "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (v.103).

Song of Songs (which many believe is a picture of Christ in his relationship with us): "With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste." (2.3) "His lips are lilies, distilling liquid myrrh." (5.13)

In relationships, taste is perhaps the most intimate of the senses—although all the senses can be used intimately, of course. I can see you now, and you can hear me, but it's not overly intimate. Sometimes one can't avoid smells, but deliberately to smell someone is rather personal. And except for the merest handshake, touch is personal, even intimate.

But taste! The mind boggles! About the least intimate way to taste someone is to kiss them full on!

To taste something, let alone taste *someone*, takes commitment. You can sit at a table looking at some strange food, sniffing tentatively, but once you taste it, you're committed. You can look at someone in a daze of adoration, but if you kiss them, then you're committing yourself. Likewise, to *taste* God—whatever that is—is a step of commitment.

When we taste food—or rather when we consume it—it’s assimilated into us, becomes part of us. To ‘feed’ on Christ, then, means him entering us and becoming part of us. “Christ in us, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1.27).

Taste is a living experience—a dead person can’t taste. If we are spiritually dead, we’ll not taste Christ. By responding to his words, by being touched by his Spirit, we experience newness of life. Then we can taste and experience that he is good.

Through taste and smell we distinguish various flavours. To be a discerning taster of food and wine takes time, experience and learning. As we grow spiritually, we gain understanding and, with God’s help, discern how God is directing us. We learn the difference between what’s good for spiritual food and what isn’t.

But our taste doesn’t just discern flavours and tell us that one food is curry and another is lemon tart. Taste—along with touch and smell—helps us to *enjoy* our food, to delight in it. Imagine what eating would be like if all food had just the one bland flavour and texture.

Do we *enjoy* Christ as we would enjoy good food? Do we rejoice in the life God has given to us in him? We need to rethink if we are good at discerning but never enjoy. Let’s not wrinkle up our noses in distaste just because some small detail isn’t right. Rather, let’s enjoy the good things God places before us. Let’s enjoy Jesus.

Eating and drinking are, of course, essential to life and strength. In today’s Old Testament story from 1 Kings 19, Elijah has fled into the wilderness. He’s spoken out on God’s behalf and the only result seems to be that he has to run for his life. He is so dejected that he asks God to let him die and he lies down under a tree and goes to sleep; but then an angel twice touches him and commands that he eat and drink. In telling him to eat and drink, the messenger of God is insisting that Elijah go on living. So Elijah obeys to strengthen himself for the journey in front of him. We need to do likewise.

We’ve all heard the little joke about the ‘see-food diet’—see the food and then eat it. Usually that’s the way it happens: we see and perhaps smell the food, and then we taste it to see if it’s any good. But notice the order in Psalm 34: taste and *then* see that the Lord is good—the opposite, by the way, of what happened in the Garden of Eden, where Eve saw the fruit and then tasted it, with disastrous consequences.

We can see—that is, understand in our minds—the attractions of spiritual life; but if we have never attempted prayer or listening to God, we haven’t “tasted”; we’ve only looked. To try praying, for example, is an act of faith. And by praying we take a taste of God. And what is it that we “see”? What we see, according to the Psalmist, is that the Lord is good!

When the Communion is celebrated, we are invited to feed on Christ, to taste him. Paul advises for our well being that we discern, understand, that it’s the body of Christ that’s being shared, but absolute understanding is impossible—it is, after all, a mystery.

What do we want to taste of God? The author of Psalm 34 tells us that he was freed from all his fears, made bright with joy, no longer ashamed, saved from all his troubles and delivered in his time of need.

As we prepare to take the Communion, to feed on Christ, let’s each reflect on the ways in which we need to taste him, what good things of God we yearn to take into ourselves.

It’s a mystery that rewards reflection and contemplation. But it’s also more than sufficient that, as the prayer book says, we come and “take this sacrament of the body and blood of Christ in remembrance that he died for us and feed on him in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving.” Amen.