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### FROM THE CANON THEOLOGIAN

Like all things Christian, the spiritual discipline of fasting has a history. It helped define the chaste and sober protest movement against Roman Empire decadence that was early monasticism. Then, for over a millennium, fasting rules helped to shape the public life of Christendom. The Protestant Reformers sought to free fasting from legalism and the many loopholes that had crept in, though without denying its importance. Yet even in the increasingly Protestant world of Henry VIII's England, abstention from meat during Lent was still legally enforced.

Fasting today has largely become a matter of personal choice, like all aspects of religion in the modern West. Shared disciplines still mark ethnic Christian community practices, but for most Anglicans it's up to us what (if anything) we might give up, and for what reasons.

I used to be dismissive of how lukewarm Anglicans typically were about this, with light drinkers giving up alcohol and the otherwise well-fed giving up some trifle (like trifle!) for Lent. Hence I used to try and be Mr Clever, recommending what's been called media-fasting or, in an address last year, suggesting that the smart phone and the wireless device ought to go in the drawer for Lent. My aim was to focus on spiritual preparation for Easter by facing our deepest temptations, which today are often not related to food.

But this year I've had a change of heart.

I've become aware of how complex and confusing a thing food has become in our society. Busy urban families can't sustain the food-centred domestic culture of simpler times, with processed, packaged and often take-away food providing the staple diet of more households than will ever admit it on surveys. Yet no restaurant review you see nowadays ever celebrates a simple menu with unpretentious meals.

Likewise today's slew of cooking shows are really—I think—about subliminally convincing ordinary people that proper cooking is too hard for them. Full marks to Jamie Oliver for trying to reinvent the family dinner, with his excellent 15-Minute Meals. But why were there so many ads for junk food during this program? And why is this most purchased of cookbooks also so widely left unopened? Food has become aspirational, despite Jamie's best efforts to rebuild a public culture of responsible and enjoyable family eating. So while we look longingly from the couch at impossible culinary feats on Master Chef, or watch Jamie while eating Dominos, we put on more weight and become a society cursed rather than blessed by food. Don't get me started on where today's obsession with thinness fits in here—and with what René Girard calls our epidemic of *gymnastica nervosa*.

## Being realistic about Lent

So this year I've decided to be less clever and more realistic about being an embodied person during Lent. As a Catholic-minded Anglican I teach that habituated practices of worship, prayer and community belonging are the foundations of Christian identity. So why not try to put the carne back into my incarnational faith—or, following a long Christian tradition, to take it out of play during Lent?

Hence at our place it's out with meat, also alcohol, during the forty days of Lent (which of course don't include Sundays—the Eucharistic days when the bridegroom is with us in a special way, and when Christians have never traditionally fasted, as the Manicheans and other heretics were known for doing).

How a Christian community approached food once marked it out, helping to sustain its distinctive identity and discipline in the world. Hence Roman Catholics were allowed fish but no meat on Fridays, the day of Christ's passion, while Christians in India were known for eating meat contrary to the majority Hindu culture. Yet Roman Catholic laity are largely indistinguishable from anyone else nowadays, while a large number of Anglicans in Australia, even if they maintain the traditional Catholic discipline of receiving communion every Sunday, balk at sharing the common cup. This shows that we have swallowed (or been swallowed by) our modern Western culture of "choices", leaving little hope that any large-scale attempt at tightening-up Church discipline will get through to us.

Hence we need to make a stand where we can, in small groups: in our households, parishes, Anglican schools, and among the staff of our welfare agencies. If we can stop shaving our top lip for 'Movember' or pin on a pink ribbon and walk for breast cancer, can we not make public statements about food and spirituality, even if they're local and sporadic?

What might motivate us to fast in Lent, and especially to follow the ancient Christian custom of giving up meat? Perhaps concern for animal welfare, for today's unfeeling commercial logic of animal transport and slaughter far from the public eye, for environmental sustainability, as a pointer to improved public health, and for feeling better and more on top of things ourselves. It also allows us to strike a blow against the culture of instant gratification that spiritual people need to be wary of. Indeed, many spiritually-minded-though-secular people are way ahead of us here.

It would be a shame if Christians left this opportunity for public witness to non-Christian groups and movements operating out of what Teilhard de Chardin called "unsatisfied theism". Indeed, as David Grumett and Rachel Muers suggest, in their book *Theology on the Menu: Asceticism, Meat and Christian Diet* (London: Routledge, 2010; p. 71), "Modern Western food spiritualities arise on sites evacuated by historic Christianity". Not at our place this Lent, however, and maybe not at yours either.

By **Scott Cowdell**

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## Comments

What a fantastic website. You are reaching out to all areas in your community and further. As I read "The Ragman" the Easter message became real for me today. Thank you from a believer on the far north coast of N.S.W

*Made by Marianna on Sun 30 June 2013*