

One of the most foundational and fraught of human relationships is that we have with food. For most of the few thousand years of our species existence finding food has been our principle and consuming activity: agriculture increased the security of our food supplies sometimes leading to a surplus and thus complex societies leading to the development of human activities and occupations that weren't directly to do with food, like chiefs and monarchs and of course the priesthood. Food is foundational.

If you can cast your mind back to those frantic early months of the pandemic what was noticeable was that our reactions were generally not focused on how to avoid getting ill and dying from some new infectious disease: instead we were panic buying pasta, hoarding sacks of flour and stripping the shelves of anything we could eat, even clearing the stock of Woodcote Garden Centre Farm Shop, second only to Fortnum's as purveyors of overpriced food. Faced with a new infectious disease, we panicked and thought of our stomachs. To my endless mystification, though, nowhere ever seemed to run out of tofu. Can't understand that.

It's not just us that are enslaved by our daily bread. We've enslaved our fellow creatures too. With food we have turned *Canis familiaris* from a wolf to a best friend bison friche; with food we have turned *Felis catus* from a distrustful disdainful human-hating demi-god into to a distrustful disdainful human-tolerating pet.

Unlike our non-human brethren, for us food is not just there for filling our bellies so we can sleep well and wake up to face another soul-grinding day of hunting and gathering. There was so much more going on with pandemic panic buying than an atavistic throwback to famine-stricken palaeolithic times.

Food is more than what we eat: it is part of our identity. Although not everyone is a foodie who only lives to eat none of us only eats to live. Food is an indelible part of our cultural and even personal makeup. So if I ask you to select from a menu that consists of drip butties, chip butties, black pudding, mushy peas, lardy cake, chips fried in beef fat and a selection of pies; you will know that I've just come with the bill of fare from one of Huddersfield's finest *cordon bleu* eating establishments. You will also know that a lot of people will not be repulsed by the offer of such primitive life-shortening fare but will be turning dribble-mouthed with anticipation at all that lard-laced chow and more pertinently, some people will be coming over all dewey eyed and emotional from what those foodstuffs *mean*. They mean the north of England; they mean no nonsense, simpler, happier days, soft focus Hovis nostalgia, a reminder

of younger, innocent days when spaghetti came in a tin and beating children was legal. Backward, yes. Uncultured, undoubtedly. But tasty. It's not the calories or the nutritional value however, because Northern food has too much of the former and too little of the latter: what it is, is food *means* something. Nothing else could explain such phenomena as grown adults wanting to eat roly poly pudding or spotted dick. Even with custard. Nothing else could explain some of the cuisine served in Scotland. I was impressed to find out just two weeks ago that the deep fried Mars bar is ancient history and the cutting edge of Caledonian cuisine is now the deep fried creme egg. For special occasions it is also apparently possible to buy a Colin the caterpillar cake that has been dipped in batter and crisped in the chip pan. Which is still a more appealing prospect than spotted dick.

Food means something: it's not just nutrition. Some of our favourite foods have very little nutrition, see above under Scotland. Food *means* something: all around the world all the great occasions of our lives are marked with food- wedding feasts and celebration cakes, romantic dinners and ham sandwiches at funeral wakes. Occasionally someone takes it a bit far and marks the arrival of a new member of the family by serving placenta paté. I think that was one of Hugh Fernley Whittingstall's signature dishes though it sounds more like Heston Blumenthal. However revolting, nonetheless it *means* something.

As individuals food is not something we need in order to live; it's something we have a 'relationship' with, with everything that entails, from eating disorders to comfort food.

And if you want any more proof that food is not just calories and protein, vitamins and fibre, when we're not looking for it, cooking it or eating it... we're to be found reading about it or watching someone else cooking and eating it. Cookbooks are always in the bestsellers lists even if we mostly look at the pictures and rarely make the recipes. The Sunday supplement glossies quiver with seductively photographed full colour canapés that we'll only ever taste with our eyes. And if we tire of reading we can turn on the box and from Fanny Craddock to the Naked Chef, Ainsley Harriet to Sunday Brunch there's always something in the broadcast schedules to get our mirror neurons masticating. That's a fancy word for chewing before you call the bishop.

It should come as no surprise then that the world religion which claims that heaven touched earth, that the divine became human, that God became incarnate; that that

religion so often describes the afterlife as a banquet. It should come as no surprise then that for two thousand years the central rite of our religion has been Christians gathering together to eat; and through that eating, communing with God.

We've come a long way from black pudding in such a short time today.

There is morning prayer, there is evening prayer. There are baptisms and funerals and informal worship and fresh expressions and all other ways Christians worship God but for the two thousand years that have passed since Jesus sat with his disciples at the Last Supper the heartbeat of our faith has been the Eucharist. It's highly stylized, ritualised (though perhaps not much more so than a wedding breakfast); stylized, ritualised, sacralised but a meal nonetheless. And what we are eating in bread and wine, the body and blood, is the very life of God.

From the earliest of days right to the present time Christians have been accused of ritual cannibalism; which is some slander and a misunderstanding and a half. When we say the Body of Christ, the Blood of Christ we mean not the flesh of a human and the blood of a man; but the body and life of God. God became incarnate in Jesus and remained God. So feeding on the body and blood of Christ, in the eucharist we feed on the divine.

At the level of an ordinary meal, the eucharist is pretty rubbish: the bread is as tasteless as we can make it; the wine— well not even the English have managed to make wine without taste— but we do only get the smallest sip. But taste and portion size is not the point.

As, hopefully, the opening of this rant demonstrated, food is not simply providing the various chemicals needed to sustain our bodily life. Eating also feeds our social needs, our psychological needs; it is infused with cultural significance and layers of meaning. The eucharist does all of these things and then adds the vital extra layer that all other meals don't have- the spiritual. Yes, the Mass is symbolic and representational; yes, it is a thanksgiving and a memorial; but it is so much more. All but the the hottest Protestants are happy to call the eucharist Holy Communion. Holy Communion: communion with God. At this table our souls feast; we are truly fed with the bread of life.

Not unlike, in many ways, many of the other meals in our lives there's always lots going on at a eucharist other than eating. There's words and reading and talking and

singing and music and colour and movement and actions and people and hard pews and cold draughts and sometimes incense and splashing water.

But please don't forget that it's the food that is the focus. Here our spirits are nourished. At this table our souls feast; at this meal we are truly fed with the bread of heaven, we drink the lifeblood of God—our souls are fed.