

Magdalen College, Oxford
22 May 2016

SERMON ON THE SIN OF GLUTTONY

So you have had pride, envy and wrath and you are about to have lust in this series of sermons on deadly sins. My topic is Gluttony. In lists of deadly sins Gluttony usually comes first. Not because it is regarded as the most serious – but because it is the most obvious. Gluttony shows. It can't be hidden. As my biology text book at school used to put it in the chapter on Digestion:

It's a very odd thing
as odd as can be
that whatever Miss T eats
turns into Miss T.

And if Miss T eats too much Miss T gets bigger and bigger. That much is clear: Gluttony is the sin that cannot be kept secret. You carry its consequences around with you, and the tendency of the glutton is to live with shame.

When it was suggested by some of the early Fathers that the original sin of Adam and Eve was gluttony - after all the fruit of the tree in the Garden of Eden was a delight to the eye and good to taste – others quickly denounced this point of view in favour of avarice or, and this is the one that stuck, pride. Gluttony was just too trivial a sin to be the cause of an event so cataclysmic as the fall of humanity.

Yet in the cultural history of the western world there is a consistent view that it is not cool to be fat. Gluttony is a lack of control, a character flaw revealed by podgy arms and jowls and layers of lard. We all recognise the caricature of Gluttony which you can still see in the wall paintings of mediaeval churches. It is a figure designed to evoke laughter as well as disgust; the huge mouth and stomach, the hands stuffing in everything they can, this is a figure who has seriously lost the plot.

The desire to gawp at those we think are guilty of the sin of gluttony is still very much around. Television presents the obese as freak show objects. Their abnormality flatters us with a sense of our own moderation. We don't need even to feel sorry for them because it is after all their own fault. They could all lose weight if they really tried. Yet as we know it is not so simple. Over eating is not just greed – which is closer to avarice – it has emotional roots as has its opposite, extreme fasting.

The first Christian theologian to try to analyse the deadly sins in psychological terms was the monk Evagrius in the 4th century. Evagrius believed that control of the appetite was an absolutely basic first step on the spiritual journey. He himself lived on a very restricted diet. A small amount of bread, a very small amount of oil and wayside herbs of which there were probably not too many in the Egyptian desert where he lived for some thirty years. Incidentally he got kidney stones from chronic dehydration after

which we could no longer eat raw herbs and had to compromise on a few cooked vegetables.

His take on Gluttony is interesting. He has nothing to say about the caricature; the grabbing, sticky-handed mouth-filling, food-stuffing lack of appetite control.

Gluttony for him had its origins in fear, in over-sensitivity to the physical feelings generated by an anxious body. You fill up because you feel empty and that is hard to endure. You fill up now because there may not be enough tomorrow. You fill up because there may never be enough. Some contemporary psychological approaches to over-eating echo this approach and speak of it as a compensation for an inner emptiness. Cure the inner hunger and over eating will look after itself.

But Evagrius's insight also points to something which is unexpected. The battle against gluttony can give rise to an opposite problem which is a terror that some foods, or any foods, defile the body and the soul. The early Christian ascetics were not immune from what we would call anorexia. We find amazing stories of monks so gripped by prayer that they forgot to eat, or so self-controlled that they refused to. One monk, obsessed by a cucumber, troubled by his longing to eat it, hung it up in his cell and gazed at it until his craving ceased. Another, invited to a feast threw down a cup of wine he was offered, screaming, 'Take this death away from me'. A thousand years later Catherine of Sienna was famed for her self-control. Apparently she lived for months on nothing but the

Eucharist. No wonder she found demons hanging around in the kitchen. Which all goes to suggest that the cure for gluttony is not extreme fasting but moderation. It is our nature to eat and drink as it is to breathe in and out. Taking in and giving out is what living beings do. The body is an engine of transformation; of air light, fluid, nutrients. Everyone is born hungry and dies thirsty.

The Bible on the whole accepts our embodied nature. It has little to say about obesity. Fasts are a sign of penitence and mourning but they are not intended to last forever. The Psalms give thanks for the fatness of the olive and the strength bestowed by bread and the cheerfulness of wine. The blessed life is one of abundance: corn and wine and oil, milk and honey. The ideal is for everyone to sit under their vine and fig tree, to have enough for themselves and to share, and in times of rejoicing to enjoy meat and wine and strong drink. Jesus feasted with his disciples and laid on feasts in the wilderness, those miracle meals of bread and fish. The birds get fed by the providence of God. They are not left to starve.

So normality from a Christian viewpoint is to have enough, but not too much: to eat and drink and to be generous in sharing our food and drink with others, and thankful to God.

This moderate way is indicated by another tale from the ancient Egyptian desert of a monk called Arsenius, who when he was told that all the apples were ripe

took a small bite of one sample of each kind and gave thanks to God as he did so.

Moderation, too, is part of the Rule of St Benedict. The food isn't bad in Benedictine monasteries. But what is interesting is that the Rule forbids individuals from fasting just when they feel like it, they have to ask permission.

To be thankful for food and drink is to acknowledge that we both have bodies and are bodies. We cannot spiritualise away our natural hunger, but nor can we eat so much that we never feel hungry again. Extreme fasting and gluttony both fail in the end because they are attempts to conquer our bodies, while our bodies, if treated with gentle discipline will actually look after us perfectly well.

The sin of gluttony, then, is not simply self-indulgence, the 'sin' of chocolate or butter or cream, what is really sinful about eating and drinking too much is that it is an attempt to repress our true bodily nature. Gluttony is much closer to its apparent opposite, extreme fasting than we might at first think. Getting high on hunger is much the same in spiritual terms as a sugar rush.

The thing about gluttony, though is that it is programmed to fail. The shame of fatness is its own punishment and penance. Which is why though it is a sin, it is not one of the most serious sins. Anger and sloth and envy and pride are considerably more dangerous.

Jesus Christ invites us not to a fast but a feast, which is why we are here to give thanks over bread and wine and to receive them as his body and blood of which we are very members incorporate. We should remember as we do so that of all the deadly sins, the only one of which our Lord was regularly accused was that of gluttony: 'The Son of Man came eating and drinking and they say, he is a glutton and a drunkard'. By the mercy of God he keeps company with us and invites us to eat and drink with him as a sign of the abundant life he offers us, an abundance which we see in the overflow of divine being which we know as the Holy Trinity, And so to God the Father God the Son and God the Holy Spirit be ascribed worship and love and praise and glory now and for ever. Amen.