

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

The phrase “you are what you eat” was coined by the French philosopher Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin. These days, the choices we make of what kinds of foods we’ll consume come with moral implications. We’re judged on what we eat: a marathon runner who eats quinoa and local produce is perceived as being virtuous, whereas a couch potato scarfing down fast food in an office cubicle is thought of as, if not exactly bad, then certainly undisciplined and reckless.

But this isn’t *quite* what Brillat-Savarin was talking about. He wasn’t making a moral statement as much as he was a philosophical—or even spiritual—one. He believed that what one eats has a bearing on one’s state of mind and emotional wellbeing—something you and I know to be true.

Today we’re celebrating Corpus Christi, which means we are giving thanks for the great and life-saving gift of the Eucharist. On Maundy Thursday we commemorated this gift in somber—and even doleful—tones. Today, we do so with joyful exuberance.

But I must ask: *does* the Eucharist we joyfully celebrate actually *mean* anything to you and me, or is it something we do by rote? I suspect that it may be. After all, this is what we “do” when we come to the Church; it’s habitual in the same way that reciting the Lord’s Prayer is habitual: we don’t think about it because we don’t need to. Routines are comfortable by virtue of their familiarity.

There’s a proverb which says familiarity breeds contempt. To have too frequent an association with somethings leads to a loss of respect for it. This is exactly what Anglicans of former generations believed. Back before the liturgical renewal of the late 1960s, the general pattern for Anglican worship was Holy Communion on the first Sunday of the month and Matins for the other Sundays. There was a real—and sincere—belief that going to Communion every Sunday would lead to a loss of meaning and a corresponding rise in spiritual ennui.

While there was certainly some wisdom to that approach, it was essentially wrong-headed, since from the beginning, the Church has “done this”—broken bread and poured out wine—as the chief act of worship on Sunday in the firm conviction that the frequent reception of the sacrament is transformative. But it can only be this if we are willing to be transformed.

You see, our faith isn't—cannot be—a private matter, something meant simply for us and for our benefit alone. It's given to us so that we, in turn, can help to transform the world ever more into the Kingdom. For at its core the Eucharist is a challenge to you and to me: a challenge to "do this": to live as Christ lived, willing to be spent for the sake of the world so that his divine life can transform our earthly lives into ones which are marked by thankfulness and joy.

Which reminds me of something Henri Nouwen once said: "To celebrate the Eucharist and to live a Eucharistic life has everything to do with gratitude. Living Eucharistically is living life as a gift, a gift for which one is grateful."

In a fascinating book, *Eating Beauty: The Eucharist and the Spiritual Arts of the Middle Ages*, theologian Ann Astell talks of two ways of eating beauty: "One way of eating beauty," she writes, "destroys the beauty of the world and the beloved; the other preserves and enhances it." She proposes that, though in lust and greed we see beauty and then consume to its and our destruction, Christ gives us himself that we might consume him and then be able to look upon him—the perfect image of beauty—and in some sense begin to be transformed into his likeness. And so, in a very real sense, the bread of the Eucharist is the reversal of the apple of Eden.

Thus, when the church "does this"—when it celebrates the sacred mysteries of the Eucharist—it proclaims that there's another way to live, a better way, one in which all of the tawdriness and ugliness and sham of our lives is transformed. One in which we consume not out of greed but in gratitude. One in which our deepest longings are met and satisfied.

When Jesus says he is the living bread, he's not only saying that he's that which feeds our physical and moral existence. He's also saying that he's One who's offered for all to share. And he's saying that he's One who connects us to one another in the profound and mystical way only something shared can do

So, imagine what would happen if, in a spirit of deep and faithful gratitude, we accepted the challenge of the Eucharist. Imagine what kinds of communities we could build if we did what Christ did: live for others instead of ourselves, forgive without counting the cost, proclaim a Kingdom of radical inclusion. Imagine what joy would be spread if we lived life as a gift to be selflessly given rather than greedily consumed. And then imagine what would happen to us if we made these things actually come true. The world and the Church would be as wondrously and miraculously transformed like bread and wine since we would have, at last, become like Christ—verifiable proof that we are what we eat.