

19 May 2019 Easter 5: Breaking the rules Acts 11: 1-18; John 13: 31-35

We often hear that saying: “You are what you eat.” Which is somewhat dismaying for someone like me who grew up with a Scottish mother who boiled cabbage for at least three hours so that no vitamin ever stood a chance of surviving – I probably didn’t see a vitamin until I left home. Nations are characterised, even caricatured, by their cuisine – from English roast beef to Italian pasta. America has pretty much conquered the world through its burger chains, French cuisine by contrast is still seen as having raised cooking to an art form.

Food arouses all sorts of reactions in us. The smell of bacon cooking has been the undoing of many a vegetarian. I still can’t persuade one of my American friends to taste haggis, so revolted is he at the thought of what’s in it. Equally, I suppose, not many of us relish the thought of sheep’s eyes, still less some of the grosser things contestants on “I’m a celebrity – get me out of here” have to eat.

So food can bring us together, but it can also separate us from each other. Even today some faith groups go to extraordinary lengths to preserve unique traditions of diet and food preparation which for them are an essential part of their identity and their way of relating to the world. Some Christians, of course, do the very same, not necessarily about food – but looking for ways of being distinctive. Like the Amish with their very separate communities, caught in a kind of nineteenth century time warp, or extreme Brethren households here who won’t use even the civic drainage system in case they are polluted by contact with the world.

But this morning here is Peter, our principle actor again, a good Jewish boy born and bred, from a home where there would have been separate dishes and pots for everything and every Jewish food law meticulously observed suddenly presented with a sort of descending tarpaulin filled with burgers and bacon and maybe even haggis, a kind of midnight feast of everything good Jewish boys don’t eat. And almost as if in a kind of starved dieter’s dream, a voice is heard: Up, Peter; help yourself.

Last week Peter broke the rules. He restored the dead Tabitha to life; he touched a woman, with no-one else in the room, and a dead woman at that. By the law he should then have had no contact with anyone until after sundown and the ritual purification of numerous washings. Here God makes him break the rules again. It’s as if the Risen Jesus is standing behind Peter with his hand at Peter’s back and giving him a great shove towards freedom, liberation. You can’t heal people if you won’t touch them. You can’t break bread with people if you won’t share their food.

This is Jesus again saying to us: Please will you get the point. Those gentile astrologers present at the Manger; the Good Samaritan; that sassy woman at the well with the five husbands; the poor woman with the haemorrhage; the believing Roman centurion; the leper who runs back to say: Thank you, Lord; the woman taken in adultery, the penitent thief on the Cross – they all feature in the Gospel story to tell us, till we get it, that this is a God who breaks the rules. This is a God who does not even see any of the labels under which all these foreigners and social rejects, have to live.

Jesus knew what it was to live under the labels of other people’s contempt, and, in the end, he was broken by the rules, and died under the rules so that the kind of rules that divide us from God and from each other might be abolished.

So what about being distinctive? If it isn't any longer about food and rituals what is it about? Well, the Gospel spells it out. The distinctive thing about being a Christian isn't what you eat, but how you love. Lord, how will people know we're your disciples? By your love, answers Jesus.

In fact, if we aren't actively seeking to extend our loving then insidiously we can find ourselves making rules. Yes, we're open and welcoming, but maybe only if you think like we do, only if you share the same diet of beliefs and customs and ways of doing things as we do. Eastertide is about allowing the Risen Jesus to give us the same shove in the back he was always giving Peter. In your life and mine, in our life together, he's saying: Go on, go a bit further. Test the limits of what you think is OK and maybe even break them.

Years ago when I started working in my first job straight from school in Dundee Street Public Library we had a somewhat fierce librarian who insisted that the children who came pouring in after school would have to show their hands before being admitted and allowed to touch the precious books. So, as each child entered, their admittedly often grubby little paws had to be held aloft for inspection. In Dundee Street Public Library clean hands were an unbreakable rule.

But the Christian community and even the Christian meal are a place where no-one checks to see if your hands are clean. They may not be, and in confession we admit as much, but this is the God whose love bids us to come in just as we are – not as we hope we'll be, but as we are in this very moment, this utterly sacred moment where, whoever we are, we are met and fed and loved.