

The cook's tale

Agatha Leach

They told their story . . . and how they had recognized him at the breaking of bread. (Luke 24:35)

The gravy trail

I OWE MY CONVERSION AND RELIGIOUS VOCATION to my mother's inability to make good gravy! I was born in Dover, just off the P & O steamer, the ship that plied between England and India where my father worked as a mining engineer. I was an unwelcome retirement gift. At the age of fifteen my mother received a letter from my headmistress suggesting that I might become Head Girl the following summer. My mother wrote immediately saying, in effect, that she had no idea that the standard of the school was so low, and I was removed immediately. This brought a family conclave. My three older sisters demanded that I should learn to counteract my mother's poor attempt at the gravy stakes. In the event this brought me to a domestic science school run by nuns. My mother said she prayed that I might be religious, but that God had inserted a preposition and I turned out as 'a' religious, which was not what she intended.

Lean years

My world up to the time of the war had been composed of horses, rabbits, cooking food for the dogs, and the great outdoors. The niceties of good food passed me by and anyway we were at war so there wasn't any! Up and down the land people like my mother, returning from service in the Empire, where everything had been done for them in the kitchen, were facing the daunting prospect of huge solid fuel cookers and a new invention – the refrigerator. Food was rationed and not to be wasted. Wild game, feathered and furred, was surely a gift of value, but how to prepare it was another matter. Hedges were scoured for rose hips, and nettles were painfully gathered, the latter apparently having a flavour somewhat akin to spinach. Amidst all this my return from a domestic science course was awaited with enthusiasm.

I found my new status as cookery guru nothing to be ashamed of. To discover that I actually had something to offer the family was heady stuff. My boiled carrots with a white sauce were greeted warmly. My

third prize at the village Women's Institute for a wilting salad was the cause for celebration. Looking back, I think how long we struggled to keep up a style of life which in our microchip age seems astonishing. It was part of our war effort not to be seen to be dropping standards. Changing for dinner, when dinner consisted only of macaroni cheese and stewed apple, was still expected, as was the damask table napkin which accompanied it. What was the value of it all? Was there something of importance behind it? The answer must surely be a resounding yes, because in these customary practices sacred ritual was being observed.

The importance of ritual

Looking back to our Jewish and Christian roots in Scripture, there are numerous references to food in one form or another, whether it be how to prepare oneself, the food, or the cooking vessels. How unthinkable it would be for the Passover meal to omit one jot or tittle of the whole.

'When you enter the land Yahweh is giving you, as he promised, you must keep to this ritual. And when your children ask you, "What does this ritual mean?" you will tell them, "It is the sacrifice of the Passover in honour of Yahweh who passed over the houses of the sons of Israel in Egypt, and struck Egypt, but spared our houses".' (Exod 12:25-27)

Similarly our celebrations of Christmas, Easter, family birthdays, weddings and christenings, were all occasions when the family gathered around the table and told stories of how it was, how it had been, and – full of hope – how it might be. Absent members were always remembered. What did it matter if the outer covering of a wedding cake was cardboard and not royal icing? It hid a cake beneath that humble exterior, made from ingredients carefully hoarded by friends who would have had to sacrifice their coupons to make it. Nor did it matter if the Christmas meal had a preponderance of stuffing exceeding the turkey or chicken meat. Stories were told around the table, family jokes shared. A ritual had been observed at the meal. And the family, however depleted, was still a vibrant focus at the end of the war.

Over fifty years later, Sue, a friend of mine, with a family of five and a husband travelling across the continents, considers a weekly meal together as the single most effective way of holding a family in unity. It is a Friday evening meal and each member of the family may have declined other social invitations to be present. For all of them this time

to be together is an important event in the week. Sue works part-time and she prepares parts of the meal in advance, so that she can spend maximum time with the family. Grace is said and during the meal each member of the family has a chance to share news of his or her week, to share the anxieties, hopes and joys of life. There is much laughter and delight in each other's company. If the father has been unable to be present, he will be in touch via the telephone and thus included in this important time. It is a sacramental event.

Today also many small religious communities set apart one evening in a week for a shared meal and time of prayer. The diverse apostolic commitments of members mean daily meals in common are not possible. This special evening then becomes the focus for the sustaining and encouraging of members in their different tasks. A time for companionship one another – feeding the body and the spirit.

These rituals, whether in families or religious communities, are part of the rites and rituals of society as a whole. They give a certain security, a boundary. They indicate hidden depths and deeper truths. They may only be seen as an outward sign, but if we discard them we do so at our peril. Ought we perhaps to be looking for rites and rituals to replace ones that have been lost? If meals are no longer eaten around a table, how will our children's children hear the story of our families, our cultures, our civilization, our faith? Is it enough to eat a sandwich in front of our television screen to be in relationship with those around us? Loneliness is cited as being one of the prevailing evils of our society, yet in many retirement homes it is a common practice to place chairs around the room facing the television with tray and sandwich on lap. It must be even worse when the chair faces no other human being and the television is the one-sided communicator.

Gravy stains – a way to faith

It seems extraordinary that gravy should have been such a strong determining factor in my life. I have much to thank it for. It is so rooted in ordinariness – just as Roman Catholicism seemed to me to be! To the disgust of my family, at the domestic science course I seemed to be drawn to Roman Catholicism. I think it was reading the life of St Thérèse of Lisieux that was the catalyst. At the time I had not read Brother Lawrence and so the image of the kitchen was not so close to hand – that came later. Though my mother reacted forcefully by taking me home, Catholicism lingered in my heart and three years later she consented to my reception into the Church. My vocation came just two

years after that. Like many young adults I moved from one state of life to another, and the initiation rites which were involved were enormously important. There was a new way of life to learn, new customs and rituals.

During my religious training I worked in the school kitchen helping another sister make fifty puddings. I remember it as a very happy time. We were working without remuneration, which was a novel experience, and we were working solely for love. Certainly it was love of God first, but the work, and so also the love, was for the children in our care. That the children were at one remove from us in the kitchen, didn't make any difference – it was for them. We worked in silence and if we were making apple pie one day, the previous evening we would peel the apples to the accompaniment of spiritual reading. Now, what were once our schools are run by devoted teachers, catering and domestic staff. Although they may be academically as successful or more so, they cannot be underpinned with more love. Despite the fact that many religious are now too old to work in a school, the love is ageless and can cross any boundaries of time and space. It is an everlasting apostolate.

Transforming aromas

Following my noviciate I went to do a teacher training course at the National College of Domestic Subjects, once the Royal School of Cookery and apparently a part of London University. There is nothing like cooking to learn to cook better and as there were few labour-saving devices, it was a hands-on experience. I chose as my special study a nineteenth-century chef, Carême, along with Escoffier, who worked with César Ritz to raise the standard of working conditions in hotel kitchens to something better than slave labour. To help with my studies I was introduced to the then *Times* cookery writer who in her turn introduced me to Elizabeth David.

Elizabeth is perhaps the most influential writer on food since the Second World War. She moved around Europe during the war years and to survive she learned to cook using the fresh produce of each land. It was her books that provided the stimulus for British housewives to emerge from the austerity years of the early fifties. Elizabeth allowed me to study in her home in Halsey Street, London, using her extensive library. While I was struggling with gastronomic French, I breathed the fragrant aromas coming from her kitchen. She had learned to make many different kinds of casseroles on her travels and she would never write about them until she had tried them out herself. Her demands for

the produce of France, Spain and Greece did much to boost the arrival of these different foods, so commonplace in our supermarkets today. Having made a particular dish, Elizabeth would lie on a chaise longue. Cooking was not done in a hurry. It was more like a spiritual experience, an unhurried prayer, an act of love.

Elizabeth taught me about marketing the French way, not to go by the look but by the taste. I always feel a little shabby if I eat a grape or cherry or am seen to squeeze a pear or press a melon à la française. Surely people will think I am stealing. The other day while chatting to a young man who is a buyer of fruit and vegetables for a major superstore with 600 outlets, I was told that British people demand uniformity of shape and colour in fruit and vegetables. Flavour has little to do with this. I find this very sad. Perhaps we are too influenced by the TV chefs. We can see what they are producing, but can neither taste it nor smell it. As regards ingredients, Delia Smith has only to mention an item and the supermarkets are sold out. Her programme on eggs was so successful that there was a shortage of eggs nationwide!

The experience of travel has been one of the single most important influences on what we eat. Our taste buds have been tantalized with meals in Spain, France, Italy, Turkey and so many other places across the world. The immigrant communities providing food for their own members have found a lucrative investment in opening a café or restaurant. Personally I think an attempt to capture the flavour of a Turkish dish far away from the country and climate never quite matches up to the dish we remember in the country itself. But the prevalence of foreign restaurants of innumerable kinds means some of us try to recapture what has probably been a holiday experience in our home town.

Fresh not frozen faith

My training prepared me to teach young women the art of home-making. I loved it and considered it the most practical way of building up happy family lives for the future. My own foundress, Mary Ward, knew that educating women would be the most profitable way of influencing a future generation in the faith. But faith has to be taught within the context of a life. Mary Ward's dictum that we should do ordinary things well suited me perfectly. The Order was generous in providing extra boosts to my cookery skills and I enjoyed courses at the Cordon Bleu in London as well as cake-decorating weekends, when my artistic skills were stretched to breaking point.

Into the 1970s I moved into overseeing the cleaning and catering firms in our schools. There is nothing like working alongside people to get to know them. My experience of large-scale catering had been in kitchens where cooking was actually done – fresh ingredients bought, prepared and made into a particular dish. I had not known about whole dishes already prepared and deep-frozen. The look and flavour of these foods depressed me. Where was the skill? Where was the love? Quality control was a new entity. Cutting corners to make a greater profit was not something I cared about. Poor standards of food preparation led even to food poisoning! We were all learning a new way of cooking and a knowledge of technology was necessary. How to use frozen foods, freeze-dried vegetables, microwaves and pre-packed goods to the best advantage, was a growing concern. A Jesuit priest had told me that food in the raw should be treated with respect as God's creation and it was not to his glory to produce badly cooked food. I have always felt the same. We still made an effort to mark the different feast days with special food and equally the fast days too. Friday was always a voluntary fast day in aid of CAFOD, which was gladly undertaken by all the students.

An encounter with angels

A chef in our preparatory school in London was an Egyptian Muslim. He was a charming man and I am happy to say he became a great friend. His prayer life was so integrated into his day that whatever was in the oven took second place to the moments reserved for Allah. I stood guard over the kitchen in his absence and tried to steer him away from a use of spices too liberal for the digestion of young children. He always prayed coming to work, and in between our jobs in the kitchen we shared our faith stories. Abraham and the meeting with the three strangers at the Oak of Mamre (Gen 18:1-15) was his favourite story and he called his daughter Sara after Abraham's wife. Muslims have a great devotion to angels and Gamal's devotion was deep, based on his personal experience. He told me his family had given hospitality to angels. His father was an Egyptian policeman and on one occasion when the family was keeping the fast of Ramadan, they were eating breakfast before first light. There was a knock at the door. Gamal was sent to see who it was. On the threshold there stood a poor family begging for bread. The father sent Gamal and his three brothers with all their breakfast to give it to the poor family. 'You never know if you are entertaining angels,' he said. The boys were most disgruntled and they

ran out into the street to find the family and prove to their father that these were not angels. But there was no trace of the poor family anywhere. Each of the boys carried this memory throughout their lives, that they had indeed given hospitality to angels.

A feast for the senses

Work in a kitchen is a great leveller. As the great St Teresa of Avila reminded her sisters, there is little time for ecstasy. But there is a lot of time to live a life of loving service. Despite all the labour-saving devices, the provision of good food for others requires sacrifice. A mother feeds her child from the moment of conception, after birth and for as long as the child remains within the family home. John O'Donoghue, in his book *Anam cara*, writes of a friend of his who speaks of food as love. There is no room for a dualist approach to this expression of loving. All the senses are involved. 'Taste and see that the Lord is good,' the Psalmist says. All the meals described in the New Testament occur within the context of ordinary life. All our senses are needed to prepare a meal of love. The sense of smell is necessary to appreciate what is to come. The sense of touch is vital for deft hands to make a favourite dish. The sense of hearing is required to listen to the needs of the guests. The sense of taste appreciates with enjoyment eating a good meal. The meal can be a revelatory moment – a glimpse of the divine.

I am reminded of three films, which illustrate different experiences of food as a sign of love. In *A man for all seasons*, Thomas More has been condemned to die. His good wife Alice is unable to comprehend why he does not save himself, but she makes the best custard tarts that she has ever made for her beloved husband to eat before his execution. His appreciation of the food expresses something far beyond the food itself. It is an acknowledgement of the love which they have for one another, which they know will last far beyond death. *Babette's feast* is an expression of the utter prodigality of God which has transforming effects as the extravagant meal so lovingly prepared by Babette brings about a complete change in the dull quarrelsome people of an inward-looking community. *Shirley Valentine* is a film about a bored housewife whose husband expects the same menu on each of the seven days of the week. On a sudden impulse Shirley gives Thursday's steak to a dog and this breaks the monotonous drudgery, freeing Shirley to experience a different way of living, which in turn enables her to grow into a

different way of loving. Eventually she sees her husband in a new light and can truly love him again.

Gristle or glory

'Are you a modern cook?' I was asked the other day. I felt like answering 'Yes, if you mean do I know what a wok is'. I do eat couscous, but I avoid sushi food like the plague and I find some nouvelle cuisine so minuscule as to leave me hungry. But it would be more truthful if I added that we were a wok-free community, the shape of the wok being incompatible with a flat electric ring; that couscous is disliked by at least two-thirds of my community; and as for raw fish, heaven defend us. Reading an extract from the chef Anthony Bourdain's book *Kitchen confidential*, I wondered who was trying to impress whom. Does he seriously enjoy sucking on the cartilage behind the eyeball of a fish? It sounds like an esoteric torture and – translated into English cookery terms – chewing gristle! Is it all just sophisticated chat with no substance? Whether I am a modern cook or not, I hope I am an authentic cook, treating raw ingredients with the respect they deserve.

Who cooks for whom? Supermarkets provide all the raw ingredients necessary but they also supply fully prepared meals for one or two or more. A young child's birthday party today may more likely take place at McDonalds than at home. For young adults, wine bars, café bars, clubs, discos and rave parties cater for social needs, including the need for physical sustenance. Who actually sits down and eats at a table where every person shares in the same food? Entertaining at home is for those in partnership, who are willing to take time to offer hospitality. It requires effort after a day's work to come home and start to prepare a meal. Often an exhausted parent gives in to a child's demand for something else from the freezer. Sitting down as a family requires a determined effort. Good manners, another word for unselfish behaviour, is often an alien concept and to prevent embarrassment a child is banished with a snack to another room to watch TV or a video, so never learning the art of living.

An additional responsibility for cooks these days is the preponderance of diets. These may be for health or religious reasons but they may also be a fad or fashion. They require a certain amount of imagination and ingenuity and it is wise to discover the requirements of guests before they arrive!

Cooking meals has been my way of getting to know people, serving them and loving them. After sixty years I am not longing to get back to the kitchen to prepare a meal. But I'm enormously grateful that I know how to do so and that it is something I can offer in the building up of a community. A cook, like a sister, never really retires – someone always needs to be fed. It has been of enormous importance to me in my life to know that God chose a meal to bring people into the closest communion with himself. My culinary efforts are but a shadow of this, God's ongoing giving of God's self to us. When I first became a Catholic I experienced a tremendous freedom as I came to appreciate that it was the work of God gradually to transform me – it wasn't about me having to achieve standards for him. For myself I know that God has chosen the weak and foolish so that I should never have anything to boast about to God. He is my wisdom, my virtue, my holiness and my freedom. God has chosen the ordinary things of this life, also the fruits and vegetables of the earth, the produce of farm and sea. These ordinary, simple things can be transformed into a creative work of art, the sustenance for body, mind and spirit, a reminder of God at work within us. And what a wonderful revelation of our resurrected Lord – divinity and humanity expressed in Christ cooking grilled fish on the seashore. And like the two on the road to Emmaus, the disciples recognized him in the breaking of bread.

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