

Move over, Paula Dean

These past two Sundays I have focused our thoughts around the biblical references to bread, and especially the reference to Jesus, the Bread of Life.

I want to continue this week with the thought “You are what you eat”.

Some years ago, *60 Minutes* commentator Andy Rooney created a stir when he posed the question “What are the two biggest categories of nonfiction best sellers?” Number one, he went on, is cookbooks. Number two: diet books. Doesn’t make a whole lot of sense, does it? Hungrily, we page through cookbooks, searching out the most tempting and succulent recipes. Then we race right over to the diet books to find out why we can’t eat that stuff!

Today, cooking shows have become one of the big favorites on cable TV. If you can cook, and a television producer likes you then it seems you could have a show. For years my favorite was the British show “Two Fat Ladies”; recently their successors have emerged “Two hairy bikers”.

What sets good cooking apart is the sensation of eating; however for that to happen there also needs to be a discerning eater. Good cooking isn’t merely to fill our stomachs but to tantalize our senses of smell, sight and taste.

That’s why Paula Dean, the American goddess of butter, has such a following; they probably will have ten years shortened from their lives, but she brings their senses alive through her cooking.

So, move over Paula Dean. Instead of our senses being tantalized by food, what does it take to bring our spiritual appetite alive?

1. In our gospel reading (John 6: 41-51) Jesus says, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

There’s an episode of the Vicar of Dibley where the parish council are trying to decide what to buy the vicar for her birthday. As it’s Christmas, and she loves chocolate, a chocolate baby Jesus was suggested. But a debate evolved about the ethics of eating a chocolate Jesus and maybe you shouldn’t. She ended up with a chocolate fountain.

Certainly in the context of our own culture these words of Jesus are strange and uncomfortable. We understand bread, but the idea of eating Jesus like we eat bread is kind of repulsive, and certainly sacrilegious.

What sort of bread this? Like the bread on the grocery store shelves, this is not a one type suits all. Admittedly when Jesus said these words, bread was limited to usually two types – leavened and unleavened; it was almost certainly home baked.

Today we have white, wheat, multigrain, rye, pumpernickel, sourdough; we have sliced bread, bagels, baguettes, Kaiser Rolls, English muffins etc. Yet maybe that's our first lesson – Jesus comes in variety.

We have differing understanding and experience of Jesus that has coloured our pictures of Jesus. That is good and healthy. It's just a challenge to live with, at times; and therefore churches have evolved that emphasize the differing varieties of Jesus. In our hearts, most of us believe it's the same Jesus, but we have become passionate with our own variety....That is, until MCC came along and mixed the varieties together, so we end up with more of a bread pudding Jesus.

Unfortunately, Most people like to hang out with those who like the same kind of Jesus, therefore to be in communion with those who like a variety is bold even controversial; but that makes spiritual life exciting.

Unfortunately our natural tendency is to try to convert everyone to our type of bread, maybe because we believe it's the healthiest, but more realistically because we're reluctant to change. Change is good. Change can be healthier.

2. Beware lest we eat just for eating's sake. Sometimes we eat, and overeat because we feel empty rather than because the food is good. Most of us know that when you're feeling empty (especially emotionally) the food demons gang up on you. If you went to a restaurant and they just served you a large plate of potato chips/crisps you'd probably not go there again But at home in front of the TV we do the same and feel it's quite ok. We often eat because we're empty and we do so usually undiscerning.

Sometimes it's all we have – gourmet meals are a privilege And few of us have the discipline of gourmet cooking for one.

There's an equal danger when that becomes our spiritual life too.

I would suggest that one of the ways we "eat Jesus" is by going to church. However, if our going to church is a mindless practice we have lost our spiritual sense of smell taste and vision and the value of the practice itself.

It's not just about what happens when we get here, but the pilgrimage: the preparation, the journey, the encounters along the way – these are as much the practice as the ritual when we arrive. We don't meet God here; God comes with us Indeed we bring God.

Without this conscious, church is just like grabbing a bag of spiritual chips – you might find something you find tasty but really it's just about filling the emptiness.

In Acts 2 we find the guide to eating Jesus – they devoted themselves to teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer. Literally they committed themselves to it as a matter of survival through which they reconnected themselves to Jesus – it was a whole meal experience, not a pick and choose.

Our faith is not in what we do but why we do it. Therefore our faith is as much about our consciousness to why we go to church, than what we do when we get there. So to stay away because we don't find the service exciting is not a real issue of faith, for faith lies in our personal devotion of coming not in what happens once we're here.

3. Is Jesus all I need? Jesus leaves open the possibility that we can distort our spiritual lives by getting this bread metaphor wrong. If you had an Evangelical background, then you're probably familiar with the prayer chorus:

He's all I need, he's all I need, Jesus is all I need.

He's all I need, he's all I need, All I will ever need.

There's something unrealistic about that song. Jesus is *all* we would ever need? If that were so we'd have a church of happy singles. But we don't. Probably in moments of deep devotion we felt that Jesus might just fulfill our every need, if we loved him enough. But I have to tell you, it doesn't work. Not if you follow the desire of Jesus that we have life in all its fullness.

Somehow we imagine Jesus as having no desire for intimacy or human love whereas we have no basis other than our inherited puritan values. We imagine a false purity because we're yet to be comfortable with our own wholeness.

“No matter what our age, no matter how deep and vital our relationship with Jesus and no matter how committed we are to following his example and trusting his teaching, it's the rare one of us who really finds that faith in Jesus *alone* is enough for spiritual health or any other category. And if we really consider the implications of Jesus' statement about being the bread of life, we can surmise *that he never intended to be all we ever need.*” In his moment of temptation in the wilderness he uttered the statement “We cannot live by bread alone.”

In the first century, all the actual bread was whole grain. The refining process that yields white bread had not yet been invented, but neither had the capacity to enrich bread either, so the whole-grain bread of Jesus' day was even less nutritionally complete than our bread today. So we can assume Jesus' bread-of-life statement meant that faith in him is the essential foundation of a spiritual life, but is not *everything* we need for spiritual health.

Our spiritual life is an experience rich in taste and aroma. We are nourished not merely by our devotion to Jesus, but by the fellowship of others who also share their “bread of life” recipes. There is no single master chef but an array of cooks and culinary technicians who have learned their own way of spiritual cuisine. Some of us have been on the same diet for years. We're devoted to it. It's easy and convenient. But sometimes we become what we eat spirituality, and in so doing reduce God to being like us, instead of venturing to enhance the image of God in us.

Go on, spoil yourself. Enhance your spiritual cuisine with someone else's recipe. You may grow to like it.