

# **Food**

**[Aim: to look at the contrast between the realities of food production and the idea that food comes from shops and especially supermarkets]**

## **Story**

**Amanda, aged twelve, needed medical help when she lost a great deal of weight very quickly after she had begun to refuse food. She claimed she was now vegan and could not eat a very large number of common foods. Although it was first thought she was suffering from the eating disorder *anorexia nervosa*, her doctor found that her problems had begun when she had discovered that food was not in fact synthetic. A city dweller, she had only ever shopped with her mother in a local supermarket, buying food largely in tins and packets. Her only exposure to live animals had been through pets and a children's zoo. She had never visited a butcher's shop or had eaten offal. She had learned that "milk comes from cows" from books for small children, but regarded this as entirely mythical.**

**On discovering that the meat she had been eating was the flesh of animals, that dairy products come from cows, that eggs come from chickens and that animals are raised and slaughtered for food, she became revolted by the idea of eating. She had become unable to cope with eating on two counts: that much food is not made of "clean" synthetic materials, but from messy animal parts, and that sweet, cuddly animals are killed for human beings to eat.**

## **Discussion**

**Amanda's story demonstrates some important aspects of life in our own contemporary western society. For many people eating their food every day, consumption of the food may be divorced from the realities of its production. The processing and presentation of food often have no immediate link to its origin and foods may be coloured or shaped beyond their natural appearance to attract the customer. Food advertising often concentrates on this kind of presentation, combining attractiveness of packaging and taste with information about its calorific content for the weight-conscious. Where the advertising alludes to the freshness of food, the portrayal of origins may be an idyllic farm setting or pictures of cartoon animals. People whose attitudes are conditioned and shaped by these images and experiences of the food they buy who have no direct experience of the farming life of the countryside, may find it more difficult to reconcile the realities of food production with how they buy and consume the produce.**

**Further, many urban dwellers do not need to be aware of the seasonal cycle of meat and vegetable production, since most foods are now available in the larger supermarkets all year round. The only thing the consumer may be aware of is variation in the price of strawberries, although some celebrity chefs (such as Delia Smith) have drawn attention to the loss of taste quality in some imported foods.**

**Another question we have to ask ourselves is about some popular presentations of animals. TV programmes focusing on vets such as *All Creatures Great and Small*, *Vets in Practice*, *Animal Hospital* (which have**

high popularity ratings) may often have sentimental perspectives on saving animals (with corresponding distress when animals die). This may make it more difficult for people to set this against the realities of producing animals for food. Many people may never have seen an animal being born or seen an animal die and find some rural attitudes towards animals unbearably robust, or even barbaric. For example, some holidaymakers have been known to give up a "learn to fish" outing on the first day when first face to face with hooks, flies and live bait.

Theologically, the Church has problems in presenting a clear and robust creation theology which addresses all these complex issues. We need to articulate a deeper theological understanding of why we are a created human species having particular nutritional needs for healthy bodies. We also need to look at what it means to be at the top of the food chain without natural predators of our own and at what influence the domestication of animals for food use and the history of agriculture has had in both human history and in the history of the planet. The need to consume food is deeply embedded in our theology and in our religious experience. We have also traditionally drawn an analogy between right relationship with God and the idea of being fed. The desire to be fed is rooted in the Lord's Prayer and is at the heart of both voluntary fasting as a religious discipline and thanksgiving before meals. The loss of such religious observance in households therefore means that many of us are not reminded of the link between God's provenance and the created order each time we eat our food. In today's western society the richer populations have choices about food use, in stark contrast to much of the rest of the globe. We can afford to roast or grill away the fat and throw away skin and bones. In other societies such

**profligate waste of an animal's resources is unthinkable. We may no longer appreciate the theological edge derived from the experience of hunger, or fasting, nor appreciate the notion of harvest or of abundance. This may have the result of reducing much biblical imagery and metaphor to mere ideas about common sharing and fellowship. Further, the pragmatic outworking is to see the plight of farmers as unrelated to the experience of ordinary life. This means that the place of farmers and other food producers needs to be highlighted as crucial to particular kinds of theological insights. In the light of this, what place should we give to "animal theology"? Is it crucial to a theological way forward or it simply a luxury we can now afford? We need to be clearer about what we can say about animals in the stewardship of the whole created order.**

#### **Some suggestions for Bible Study**

**Genesis 1:26**

**Leviticus 11**

**Matthew 15: 16-20**

**Acts 10: 9-16**

**Choose one or two questions for discussion:**

**What do you think animals are for?**

**Do you care about what happens when animals die? If so, why? What might be unacceptable to you about how or why animals die?**

**Are you vegetarian/vegan? Why?**

**Are there particular foods you won't eat? Why? What alternatives are acceptable to you?**

**Could you slaughter, prepare and cook animal food if you had to? If not, why not?**

**Possibilities for drama or role play:**

**Can you sympathise with what happened to Amanda? What would you have done if you were her parents? What would you have advised if you were her doctor? What do you think might have happened to her?**

**Look at advertising for food. Imagine you had to promote or endorse a product. What words would you use? What might make people buy? Why?**

**Reflection:**

**How does God want us to behave in respect of animals? How does this affect how we think about farmers and farming, other food producers, food promoters and sellers, supermarkets and local shops?**

**A Hymn and a Prayer**

**For example: *Guide me O thou great Redeemer***

**or: *We come as guests invited***

**God,**

**You blessed and broke bread for your friends to share with you.**

**Share your love with us always, as we seek to share your love with others.**

**Amen**