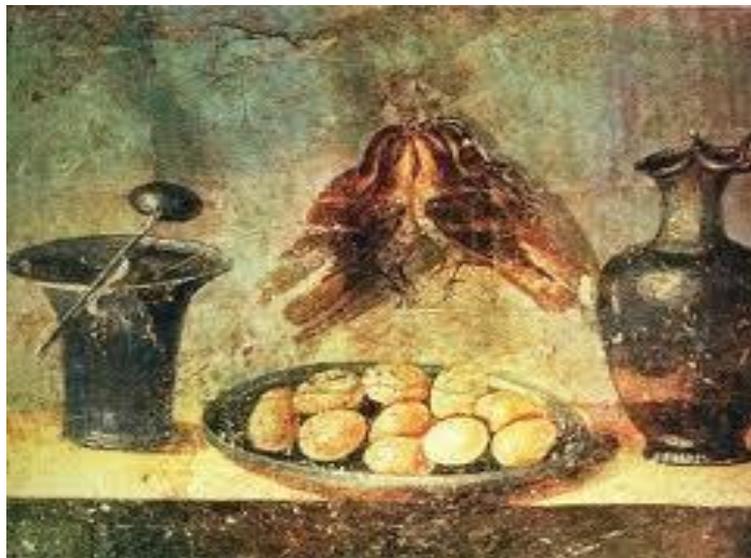


FOOD, FASTING AND THE FATHERS



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PREFACE

Towards the end of last year, I met with Bishop Brian to talk about what offerings I might present on behalf of the Institute for Anglican Studies in 2014. I had been thinking about a topic on food and drink for Lent, and in this, I received an encouraging, even enthusiastic, response from Bishop Brian. He suggested that we involve the Precentor in our discussions and Graeme was invited in to give his thoughts. It was Graeme who then suggested that we might vary the time slightly in order to link the series with the “Eat, Drink Perth” promotion that was occurring in April.

As a result, a hardy troop found themselves in the Burt Hall after sunset listening either to my lectures or to the more pleasant strains of the choir rehearsing the St Matthew Passion in the Cathedral. The evenings were enjoyable and stimulating, and a number of people who were not able to attend (and some who did) asked for the texts of the lectures.

The result is this small booklet, which contains the texts of the lectures as given and without any of my customary asides, or the Dean’s occasional *mot juste*. I have not included any of the illustrations that I used for two reasons: firstly, they were mostly not essential and largely used to distract from my shortcomings as a lecturer, and secondly, neither I, nor the Cathedral, own the copyright and so we cannot legally reproduce them without permission. All translations in the text are either mine or adapted from those already in the public domain

This Preface also gives me a unique opportunity to thank the Dean for his support for the Institute and his promotion of the intellectual life of the Cathedral. John is a distinguished scholar in his own right, as well as a gifted communicator, and person of unfailing wisdom and humour. For nearly a quarter of a century, St George’s has enjoyed that unique combination of learning, acumen and wit, and our Cathedral community has been deeply enriched by it. I wish John a long and happy retirement and, for what it is worth, this little booklet of essays is dedicated to him in grateful thanks.

Dr Bill Leadbetter
Pentecost, 2014

FOOD AND DRINK IN THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN WORLD

This lecture this evening is the first of a series of three in which we will explore the culture of eating and fasting within the early Christian communities of the Mediterranean rim. The reason that we are looking specifically at these communities is because these are those that we know the most about. The balance of the evidence that we possess, both written and visual, relates to those communities. The journey that we will take over these three lectures will range over some basic questions: what kinds of food were routinely eaten in ancient Mediterranean communities? To what extent were particular kinds of food signifiers of wealth and status? What was the social function of eating? In what contexts did people elect to refrain from eating? This evening's lecture is basically intended as scene-setting. I want to spend this time looking at the general Mediterranean context. In this way we can establish what, if anything, was distinct within early Christian communities, and what was not.

Perhaps the most famous of all scenes of Roman eating is found in the *Satyricon* of Petronius. This is the section of the work generally labeled "The Feast of Trimalchio" (*Cena Trimalchionis*). Trimalchio is a grotesque figure, a freed slave who has made vast amounts of money. For the author, Trimalchio represents that class with which all traditional aristocratic élites feel least comfortable: the *nouveau riche*. Petronius lampoons Trimalchio's pretension of learning and the feast that he describes is a progression of increasingly rich and complex courses in which dishes are dressed up to look like other dishes:

We should never have seen the end of these tiresome inflictions but for the Extra-Course now coming in,--thrushes of pastry, stuffed with raisins and walnuts, followed by quinces stuck over with thorns, to represent sea-urchins. This would have been intolerable enough, had it not been for a still more outlandish dish, such a horrible concoction, we would rather have died than touch it. Directly it was on the table,--to all appearance a fatted goose, with fish and fowl of all kinds round it. "Friends," cried Trimalchio, "every single thing you see on that dish is made out of one substance." With my wonted perspicacity, I instantly guessed its nature, and said, giving Agamemnon a look, "For my own part, I shall be greatly surprised, if it is not all made of filth, or at any rate mud. When I was in Rome at the Saturnalia, I saw some sham eatables of the same sort." I had not done speaking when Trimalchio explained, "As I hope to grow a bigger man,--in fortune I mean, not fat,--I declare my cook made it every bit out of a pig. Never was a more invaluable fellow! Give the word, he'll make you a fish of the paunch, a wood-pigeon of

the lard, a turtle-dove of the forehand, and a hen of the hind leg! And that's why I very cleverly gave him such a fine and fitting name as Daedalus. And because he's such a good servant, I brought him a present from Rome, a set of knives of Noric steel." These he immediately ordered to be brought, and examined and admired them, even allowing us to try their edge on our cheeks.

The image of Roman gluttony that Petronius crafted in the *Satyricon* is one that persists, and has helped to craft a popular perception of Roman decadence. There were feasts of a sort, and certainly feasts that celebrated the inventiveness and ingenuity of Roman chefs, but they were as normal then as the analogous ingenuity of Heston Blumenthal is now.

The Roman or Greek in the street could never aspire to be consumers of the kind of food that Petronius describes. In the second century BC, the Roman statesman Cato the Censor wrote a work on agriculture. In the course of this wide-ranging handbook, he recommends the following rations for the slaves who work in his fields:

Rations for the hands: Four modii of wheat in winter, and in summer four and a half for the field hands. The overseer, the housekeeper, the foreman, and the shepherd should receive three. The chain-gang should have a ration of four pounds of bread through the winter, increasing to five when they begin to work the vines, and dropping back to four when the figs ripen.

The wheat is for bread rather than gruel, and this text makes it clear that bread was the most basic of foods. Here, the bread is wheaten, probably because Cato, a parsimonious manager, would have used a poor grade wheat from his own lands. In other contexts, the bread might have been spelt or barley. The basic importance of bread for the ancient Mediterranean diet is perceived through the role that it played in Roman politics. In 123BC, the Roman politician Gaius Gracchus established a monthly corn ration for the people of Rome so that they had a guaranteed food supply. That policy was taken over by the emperors, who took responsibility for ensuring that a city of over a million inhabitants never starved. In the time of Augustus, 200,000 households received the grain dole. There were regional variations of the kinds of bread that was made. In the Mediterranean and western parts of the Roman Empire, the bread was leavened and often baked into round cakes. In the Near East, bread was unleavened. In Egypt, bread was made much as *naan* is still made: the unleavened dough being slapped onto the wall of the oven and left to bake in the heat of the bricks until they fall off (when they are done).

While the fact of the grain dole privileged Rome over other cities of the Empire, bread remained universally important as a common staple for even the poorest. It is important to recognize too that there is little distinction to be made between city and country in terms of cuisine. Cities were small and market gardens reached to their walls. That means that we can talk realistically of food options that were available to most people. The best way to understand what those food options were is to look at what we now call the “Mediterranean diet”. This diet, which has not only been identified by current nutritionists as highly desirable, but has also been listed by UNESCO as an intangible artifact of cultural heritage, provides variety and nutrition.

It is, fundamentally, but not entirely, based on the intake of fruits and vegetables. If we take out of current Mediterranean cookbooks the foods that were introduced from the Americas, most notably the tomato, the potato, the capsicum and the eggplant, then what we have is a diet that is high in consumption of olive oil, olives, onions, leeks, radishes, celery, cucumber, carrots, lettuce of various kinds, eggs, white cheeses, yoghurt, artichokes, legumes (peas, cannellini beans, chickpeas), stone fruit (both fresh and dried), citrus fruits (particularly lemons) and apples. The principal flavouring agent for all of this is salt, although other herbs and spices could be used. Salt might be added to food in its crystalline form or it could also be added in a sauce called *garum*. This was a common ingredient in ancient cuisine and several sources describe quite clearly the pretty noisome circumstances of its manufacture. The basic method is to use small fish whole. They are heavily salted and left in the sun to ferment. The salt retards the decomposition of the fish, so instead, they liquefy. When the process has gone on for long enough, the fermented fish sludge is strained through a fine mesh. The clear liquid that emerges is the *garum*, while the solids that remain are called *altec*, and used as a garnish. While it sounds vile, the *garum* had the same function in cuisine as Vietnamese *Nuoc Mam* or Thai *Nam Pla*, both of which are fish sauces. These sauces not only add salt to the food, but act as flavor supplements, adding a kind of hearty element that food scientists call *umami*.

The most common sweetener was honey, and herbs used in cooking varied from the common (thyme, oregano, parsley, coriander, basil, bay, mint, garlic, anise, dill and hyssop) to the rare and expensive (pepper, saffron). Ancient Mediterranean cooking was highly flavoured with such herbs and they might also be baked into bread.

Fish was widely eaten in coastal and riverine areas, and even cultivated in elite fish farms. It did not keep for long in a world without refrigeration unless it

was dried, smoked, or turned into *garum* and *allec*. The consumption of fish was therefore determined by a combination of geography and wealth. Fish could be caught opportunistically or in the context of a fishing business such as Peter, James and John operated on the Sea of Galilee. Their principal catch was a fish related to John Dory which is now called “St Peter’s Fish”. The poor could forage for shellfish and sea urchins, while wealthier coast dwellers enjoyed the varied produce of the sea: fish, octopus, squid, eels. Oysters were farmed; the turbot, a large flatfish, was regarded as an especial delicacy, and the floors of elite dining rooms were often decorated with *trionphe d’oeil* mosaics showing food scraps including discarded shellfish. Nothing was thrown back into the sea. Even undersized fish had their part to play in the manufacture of *garum*.

The regular consumption of meat was a marker of social class and often also had religious implications. In most contexts, the meat which was offered for sale had first been sacrificed in temple worship. Most grazing animals were offered for sacrifice and then consumed in this way, although the general preference was for pork. This is simply because the live pig does not produce any products, like wool or milk, that can be otherwise used. In the period of the late empire there was even a pork dole in the city of Rome alongside the grain dole. For the most part, however, meat that came to market served a double purpose. It was both a product to be consumed and a gift to the gods. It was very rare, in the conduct of animal sacrifices, for the entire animal to be consumed (*holocaustos*) and such an act was recognized as especially sacrificial. More commonly, when an animal was sacrificed, its inedible parts were offered to the god, while the edible meat was distributed. Just how that meat was distributed differed depending upon the circumstances of the offering. A public act of civic sacrifice would necessarily be accompanied by a distribution of the meat to those citizens present. When the more frequent act of sacrifice for private benefit occurred, then the temple itself onsold the meat to the meat markets as a source of income for the temple.

For the most part, when animals were sacrificed, they were those that were of value for their produce. Fish were not offered for sacrifice since they were harvested wild from the environment. Neither were game animals like deer or boar for much the same reason. The poor, if they wished to make a public offering either offered a tame bird, like a hen or a pigeon, or pooled resources in the context of a society called a *collegium*. The kind of animal that one could sacrifice was a mark of status, and the wealthy might be expected to display their wealth by the sacrifice of cattle, sheep, goats and pigs. It is no accident that the colloquial word used to describe meat purchased in the

market was *sacra*, sacred things. We have no real idea what meat of any kind cost, but it was unlikely to have been purchased by those at the bottom end of the social scale, simply because they had no kitchens to cook it in. Most meat was purchased either by households of moderate wealth (or more) or by cookshops and the purveyors of street food.

If this is a general description of what people ate, the answer to the question of what they drank is somewhat simpler. For the most part, people drank water or wine. Water was the most common drink, and its basic importance is demonstrated by the kinds of resources that the Romans put into securing the water supply. The remains of their aqueducts still march across the fields outside Rome, as well as through other parts of the Empire. These are some of the most notable relics from Roman antiquity. The Pont du Gard, outside Nîmes in southern France, is a monument both to the ingenuity of Roman engineering and the Roman commitment to provide reliable running water supplies to the towns of the empire. Even those places that were off the beaten track and therefore unserved by such great aqueducts, made arrangements for the secure collection and storage of rainwater. At Aperlae, an isolated town on the southern coast of Turkey, the lack of a secure year-round water supply was addressed by the construction of over forty cisterns that collected rainwater in winter for storage and use in the dry, hot summer.

Water, of course, was not always safe to drink. Fruit juice was consumed by the élite, particularly élite women, but its profligate use of fruit only made it an option for the wealthy. Wine, on the other hand, was not an élite drink, although there were élite wines. Cato advised giving slaves something that he called “after-wine” to drink. This was produced by taking grape pressings and then soaking them in brine and then pressing the resulting mixture. This was the roughest of all Roman wines, and therefore the cheapest. The most commonly drunk wine was called *posca*, and this was basically water and sour wine. Other sweeter versions included *mulsum*, which was an infusion of honey in wine. Ancient wine was highly alcoholic, more like a spirit than a wine, and so was routinely cut with water. This even went for the élite wines. Indeed, it was thought that drinking neat wine was at best a sign of eccentricity, and at worst, downright mad. This went as much for élite wine as for the *vin ordinaire* of the street bars. The most highly prized wine, Falernian, was so alcoholic that it would ignite if placed near a naked flame. Other élite wines were less volatile yet also drunk mixed with water.

While wine was a common drink throughout the Mediterranean basin, it was not universally consumed. In Egypt, the principal drink other than water was

beer. Egyptian beer is nothing like what we consider to be beer, but is more like an ale. Although it was still made by fermenting grains, hops were not used to flavor the beer, nor was the beer strained, so it was much sweeter than we are used to and also the consistency of thin porridge. Moreover, the grain was not mashed, but baked so that their beer was, almost literally, fermented bread. In some places, beer was drunk through a straw so as to filter out the unwelcome solids that floated in the mix. Romans themselves did not much like beer but others did. It was a staple in Egypt and other beer-drinking cultures included the Syrians, Armenians, Thracians and, unsurprisingly, the Germans.

One thing that was not drunk was milk. Milk was used as an ingredient in cooking, but for the most part it was not consumed as a drink. Goats, sheep and cows were milked principally for their cheese and for other milk products like yoghurt.

Different communities, of course, ate different food. City diet differed from country diet; army diet from civilian diet. Few foods seem to have been taboo although there is not evidence for the eating of dogs, cats or insects. On the other hand, just about every other beast was eaten including rodents from the largest (rabbits and hares) to the smallest (voles and dormice). Much depended on what facilities each household had for food preparation. It is important to remember that the only way of storing food was by preserving it through pickling, smoking or drying, and so larders as such were rare in the cities, although necessary in farmhouses and much of the countryside. Our best evidence for Graeco-Roman domestic arrangements comes from the ruins of Pompeii. Only the town-houses of the wealthy were equipped with kitchens. These were not great working galleys but poky little dog-boxes and must have been very uncomfortable to work in. Of course the actual work was done by house-slaves and so there were was little incentive to provide them with luxurious conditions. Most people who lived in ancient cities did not live in houses at all but in apartments. Since there were no lifts, the very poorest lived on the top floor of building that could be five stories. A block of apartments was known as an *insula* (literally, “island”), and while apartments might have braziers with which to heat food and keep warm in winter, they were not equipped for cooking. Those who lived in apartments took their food, instead, on the streets. Again, Pompeii is very helpful here, as is Ostia, the ancient port of Rome. The street fronts of apartment buildings were generally let out to commercial businesses, and many of these were small cookshops and fast food bars (*popinae*). These dispensed fast food and

cheap wine much as street stalls do today in South-East Asia. Hot food was kept warm in vats that were sunk into the counter and heated with charcoal.

For many people, a day's eating began with a rough breakfast of old salted bread moistened with water, *posca*, or sometimes milk. Lunch was something similar, but perhaps with the addition of some olives or cheese. Dinner was the main meal of the day. For the poor, it was taken at the end of the working day. For the wealthy, it could begin in the early afternoon and stretch deep into the night. For the many in the city without kitchens, that meant an almost exclusive diet of bread and take-away food. Graeco-Roman street food was fresher and leaner than contemporary fast food, and composed of far more vegetables and far less sugar (there was no crystal sugar in antiquity; honey was used as the principal sweetener). Any meat it contained, however, was of far more dubious quality. Men could also eat in the fast-food bars (as well as take food back to their families). These provided a kind of common living room, much as English pubs did for working class men who had little space in the home, so instead spent their evenings drinking at the local.

I am conscious that these comments are now less than general and instead refer only to men. After sundown, women and small children were confined to the home for the most part, both for reasons of safety and because they did not share in the social lives of the men. If not dining with their families, men of any class might instead attend convivial evening feasts. Even those of humble means had access to membership of brotherhoods and societies, the principal purpose of which was to provide for their funerals when they died. These sodalities marked their common identities by common meals. There are two particular points of interest with respect to these meals: the first is that dining together was an important social practice. It defined the community or society of which you were a member. This practice, called commensality by sociologists, has the function of establishing for its participants a community of obligation. It answers the question that the lawyer asked Jesus: "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. In classical society, neighbourliness was most clearly seen by those with whom one shared a meal. It was a signifier of communal identity and also communal boundaries. The second point that emerges from this is that, in at least some cases, the hosts of banquets sought to retain social and economic differences at the table. Pliny the Younger tells the story of one banquet:

It would be a long story -- and it is of no importance -- to tell you how I came to be

dining -- for I am no particular friend of his -- with a man who thought he combined elegance with economy, but who appeared to me to be both mean and lavish, for he set the best dishes before himself and a few others and treated the rest to cheap and scrappy food. He had apportioned the wine in small decanters of three different kinds, not in order to give his guests their choice but so that they might not refuse. He had one kind for himself and us, another for his less distinguished friends -- for he is a man who classifies his acquaintances -- and a third for his own freedmen and those of his guests.

I am aware that this has been a broad and general survey. This is a matter of sad necessity since I am trying to bring together a great deal of evidence and the result has been a general and not especially nuanced description of ancient Mediterranean food habits and culture. While I am aware that I have omitted far more than I have included, the main points, nevertheless remain. Bread was universally eaten; water and wine were universally drunk. The rest was variety.

FOOD AND DRINK IN ANCIENT CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

In her study of early Christian attitudes to food, the Oxford and Yale scholar Veronika Grimm begins with a contrast. She cites the book of Acts 2, with its image of eating and fellowship, and contrasts this with an epistle of St Jerome written some three centuries later. These are the texts:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread... Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts... (Acts 2.42, 46)

No other matron in Rome could dominate my mind but the one who mourned and fasted, who was squalid with dirt, almost blinded by weeping... The psalms were her music, the Gospels her conversation, continence her luxury, her life a fast. No other could give me pleasure but one whom I never saw eating food... (Jerome, Epistle 45.3)

She writes: "Hospitality, loving kindness, and cheerful conviviality on the one hand and on the other, contempt for the world, mortification of the flesh, weeping and groaning are held up by the authors of these passages as ideal patterns for Christian behavior." Are these both contemporaneously true, or has something changed in three hundred years? This is the question to which we will begin to develop our own response tonight through an examination of the first part of the conundrum: what early Christians ate, when they ate it, and what role eating played in the life of the early church. We have some very useful sources: the Epistles and the Book of Acts in the New Testament; the writings of contemporary Christian writers, those we call the Church Fathers; and the writings of contemporary observers of Christianity.

It is useful, I think, to begin with the origin of Christianity as a reform movement within Judaism. The first Christians were Jews and normal practice for them was what Jews did in terms of common dining. It is a truism, but an important one, that Judaism is a religion that eats. A lot of time is wasted at looking at what Jews ate and how, when it is more useful to look at when they ate and with whom. Then, as now, a sense of community is established within Jewish life through the simple expedient of eating together. The most obvious example is the Passover feast, but the *seder*, which is as much a ritual as it is a meal, is an annual event. More frequent still is the weekly gathering of family friends and guests for the Friday evening meal that marks the commencement of the Sabbath. The Jewish writer Josephus

understood these rituals as something a little like a Hellenistic symposium or the regular feast of a Roman sodality:

“Accordingly, on the occasion of the feast called Passover, at which they sacrifice from the ninth to the eleventh hour, and a little fraternity, as it were, gathers around each sacrifice of not fewer than ten persons (feasting alone not being permitted), while the companies often included as many as twenty, the victims were counted and amounted to two hundred and fifty-five thousand...” (BJ 6. 423-4).

The key words here are “little fraternity”. It was not open house, but a closed society governed by ritual and tradition. This “little fraternity”, referred to in Hebrew as a *hăbūrāh*, had rituals that defined it and the shared meal itself and the rites that surrounded them were clear signifiers of Jewish identity.

It is this identity that was shared by the first Christians who did not regard themselves as members of a new religion, but as proper Jews. Jesus ate with his own community and the eating of food becomes extremely important at different points in the gospel story. Whether we look at the miracle at Cana where Jesus turned water into wine, or the miracle of the multiplication where he fed thousands of people, or the people with whom he chose to eat. In particular he was criticized for eating with, and therefore admitting into table-fellowship, those who were despised:

And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Mk 2. 14-17).

Shared meals were the point at which the disciples sat most regularly to converse with Jesus. And as the gospel accounts go on, meals become more, rather than less important. The Last Supper has become sacralised as the first celebration of the eucharist, but it was also a meal, perhaps as has been argued, a Passover *seder*. After Jesus’ resurrection, two of Jesus’ followers encounter him on the road to Emmaus, but they do not recognize him until they invite him into their home and he breaks the bread for their evening meal. In John’s gospel, some of the disciples encounter Jesus sitting by the Sea of Galilee cooking them a breakfast of fish.

Food then, was central to the common life of the earliest Christian community. So when Luke describes the Jerusalem church in the terms that he does, with its nexus between teaching and table fellowship, he is describing something like a *hăbūrāh* and something like a Hellenistic symposium. One of the main items of controversy with which this community had to deal was whether to keep Jewish dietary law. Their instinct was to do so, and James, Jesus' brother and the leader of this community, sought to ensure the maintenance of a Jewish diet. In this he ran up against the slightly equivocal resistance of Peter and the far more robust opposition of Paul. James' community in Jerusalem saw themselves as the guardians of the essentially Jewish character of the early church, while the Christians of the diaspora were opening up membership of their communities to gentiles who were not circumcised, nor did they adhere to dietary custom. This resulted in the first clearly identifiable conflict within the Christian churches, and was marked by an attempt by the Jerusalem community to impose its authority upon the diaspora churches.

While the result was the first church council, which sought to resolve the matter, for many it did not and the conflict over diet and circumcision continued, as indicated by key documents like Paul's letter to the Galatians. Narratives like those in Acts 10 attempt to deal with these. Here, Peter has a vision in which an angel tells him that all foods are lawful and soon afterwards, he receives messengers from a gentile commander named Cornelius, who has invited him to Caesarea. Peter, affected by his vision, goes, and is received with honour and preaches there amongst the gentiles, many of whom then speak in tongues as a sign of their acceptance of the Holy Spirit. Faced with such incontrovertible evidence of God's intention and God's work, he recognizes and proclaims the authenticity of the Gentile community of believers in Caesarea and baptizes them with water.

This narrative is as much about food as it is about Jewish and Gentile Christians. It is here that the community of Christians began to make clear distinctions between themselves and the Jewish community. The Christians (or at least most of the them) no longer held the dietary laws to be authoritative, while members of the Jewish community found this a clear line of fracture between themselves and this zealous and spirit-filled community of believers. The Acts 10 story also draws a line between the Jewish and Jerusalem origins of the church and its growth into the Gentile communities of the Mediterranean world. As all of these communities were formed, they were formed around food. The common meal remained the common shared experience of the community. In I Corinthians 11, Paul criticizes members of

the Corinthian community who come to the feast and then proceed to eat their own food. Paul says to them: “Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper. For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others; and one is hungry and another is drunk.” The common meal is here being abused by members of the Corinthian community who prefer to bring their own picnic rather than share. This meal is distinct from the celebration of the Eucharist, which follows.

The reference to members of the community bringing their own food raises the question of what people actually ate. There was a serious question in these communities about the eating of meat. This was not a matter of reverence for animal life, or even a compromise with Jewish dietary practice, but over the origin of the meat itself, most of which had first been consecrated in temples as animal sacrifices. In I Corinthians 8, Paul argues that, since such gods do not exist, then nothing can be effectually consecrated to them and so the eating of the meat does not in itself constitute a barrier between the consumer and God. But Paul is also careful to say that, while there is no actual barrier, the perception of one in some observers can lead to folly and apostasy. He continues in Chapter 10, arguing:

*“ 25 Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience, 26 for “the earth and its fullness are the Lord’s.” 27 If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. 28 But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, out of consideration for the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience— 29 I mean the other’s conscience, not your own. For why should my **liberty** be subject to the judgment of someone else’s conscience? 30 If I partake with thankfulness, why should I be denounced because of that for which I give thanks?”*

Paul here makes it clear that the only harm in eating sacrificed meats lies in unworthy judgements of it. His approach to this is essentially one of “don’t ask, don’t tell” but, where someone might be offended by eating or not eating, he advises doing whichever does not give rise to offense. In *Romans*, his last (and probably greatest letter), he writes a little more peevishly of those who insist upon the exclusion of sacrificial meats from the Christian diet:

14 Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. 2 Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. 3 Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. 4 Who are you to pass

judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

The reason that this matter so much was because the feast at which the food was consumed were common ones. This argument was not about what people did in the privacy of their own homes, but at the common meal that came to be referred to as the “love” or *agape* feast. It is first referred to in these terms in the Epistle of Jude who warns against those who join in the feasts for a free feed rather than for any spiritual benefit:

“11 Woe to them! For they go the way of Cain, and abandon themselves to Balaam’s error for the sake of gain, and perish in Korah’s rebellion. 12 These are blemishes on your love-feasts, while they feast with you without fear, feeding themselves. They are waterless clouds carried along by the winds; autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, uprooted; 13 wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the deepest darkness has been reserved forever.”

The *agape* feast and the eucharist seem to have been celebrated together in the church’s earliest years. An early church document, probably from the latter part of the first century, known as the *Didache*, speaks of them together, and the Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans forbids the holding of a love feast apart from the presence of the local bishop. Pliny the Younger, a Roman writer, provides a picture of the *agape* feast. In the early second century, he was sent to govern the Roman province of Bithynia-Pontus (north-western Turkey), and in the course of his tenure, he investigated the activities of the Christian communities under his rule. He reported his findings in a letter to the Emperor Trajan:

They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food--but ordinary and innocent food. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition. (Pliny, Letters, 10. 96)

So, what sorts of things did people eat at such love-feasts? Were they symbolic feasts, as the Eucharist is today, or was there a substantial meal? On the basis

of the evidence that we have examined so far, we have to assume that it was a good meal, and that it took the form of a “bring a plate” gathering. It is also clear that the basis for sharing the meal was the bread and wine of the eucharist. As I have already argued, bread was the basic food, and wine the basic drink of the Mediterranean world. To be sure, the quality of both differed from place to place and church to church, but whatever they looked and tasted like, the bread and the wine remained common features. Sometimes, as Paul tells us, this was all that was common: in egregious cases people did not share their meals, a practice that was known, although not much approved of in the banqueting tradition of classical society.

For some, though, it did not avail them anything even if they shared their *haute cuisine* around equitably. Some Christians began to develop the view that food was fuel, and so resources ought not be wasted on titivating it. In the second century, Clement, the Bishop of Alexandria wrote about the agape feasts of his community:

They partake of luxurious dishes, which a little after go to the dunghill. But we who seek the heavenly bread must role the belly, which is beneath heaven, and much more the things which are agreeable to it, which "God shall destroy," says the apostle, justly execrating gluttonous desires. For "meats are for the belly," for on them depends this truly carnal and destructive life; whence some, speaking with unbridled tongue, dare to apply the name agape, to pitiful suppers, redolent of savour and sauces. Dishonouring the good and saving work of the Word, the consecrated agape, with pots and pouring of sauce; and by drink and delicacies and smoke desecrating that name, they are deceived in their idea, having expected that the promise of God might be bought with suppers. (Paidagogos 2.1)

Clement, you can see, was not a Masterchef kind of guy. He represents an increasing ascetic trend in Christianity that will be the principal focus for our discussion next week. For the moment, however, it is worth noting the negative evidence that he provides. Through inveighing against those rich and highly flavoured meals, products of a kitchen, he is telling us that there were some quite high status Christians in the Alexandrian church, and that they shared something of that with the Christian community through agape feasts that were more lavish than Clement could tolerate.

The invitation to attend and partake in the love feast was not an open one. It was for initiates – members of the Christian community only. It is clear from documents as early as Paul’s letters that the right to participate in the

Eucharistic meal was only granted to baptized members of the Christian community. In I Cor 11, he writes:

27 Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹For all who eat and drink without discerning the body,* eat and drink judgement against themselves.*

This closed society was one familiar to ancient Mediterranean culture. The religious brotherhood or association which centred its life on communal meals was a familiar sub-community. Its boundaries were set by table-fellowship, just as Jewish feasts were. A long inscription from the Roman town of Lanuvium, dating from the time of the Emperor Hadrian, (117 – 138), sets out the rules and regulations for membership of a burial association, including membership dues, a schedule for regular banquets, and a list of penalties for unfinancial members. While burial associations was the most respectable form of club membership, there were many other clubs and kinds of clubs (*collegia*). While they were formed for many reasons, common factors were that their membership was closed, with rules for admission to each, and that the boundaries of belonging were set by admission to the communal meal. Most celebrated their common existence In his *Apologia*, Tertullian argued that Christian meetings are the same as any regular club, except that its members behave better!

Yet about the modest supper-room of the Christians alone a great ado is made. Our feast explains itself by its name. The Greeks call it agapè, i.e., affection. Whatever it costs, our outlay in the name of piety is gain, since with the good things of the feast we benefit the needy; not as it is with you, do parasites aspire to the glory of satisfying their licentious propensities, selling themselves for a belly-feast to all disgraceful treatment—but as it is with God himself, a peculiar respect is shown to the lowly. If the object of our feast be good, in the light of that consider its further regulations. As it is an act of religious service, it permits no vileness or immodesty.

Perhaps somewhat more priggishly, but equally directed to a non-Christian audience, Clement of Alexandria expressed the limits of Christian table-fellowship in the following way:

Nor do we take our food from the same table as Gentiles, inasmuch as we cannot eat along with them, because they live impurely. But when we have persuaded them to have true thoughts, and to follow a right course of action, and have baptized them with a thrice blessed invocation, then we dwell with them. For not even if it were our father, or

mother, or wife, or child, or brother, or any other one having a claim by nature on our affection, can we venture to take our meals with him; for our religion compels us to make a distinction. Do not, therefore, regard it as an insult if your son does not take his food along with you, until you come to have the same opinions and adopt the same course of conduct as he follows. (Clementine Homilies 13.4)

For some outside the Christian community, of course, the very name “agape feast” excited suspicion, particularly when it became known that Christians ate the flesh and drank the blood of their God. That is why, when Pliny described his interrogation of Christians, was careful to note that the food that they ate was of “an ordinary and innocent kind”. The Christian apologist, Minucius Felix, writing in the late second or the early third century, refers in his dialogue *Octavius* to the kinds of popular libels of Christians that emerged from their preference for strict rules of table-fellowship. What is clear from the *Octavius* is that people were accusing Christians of confusing love with lust so that the injunction to love one another went a little too far. Other accusations included worshipping the head of an ass (a common misconception as the Alexamenos graffito from the Palatine demonstrates) and worshipping the genitals of their priests. More serious, however, is the accusation that Christians killed babies and drank their blood, and that their feasts were little more than indiscriminate orgies that included children:

On a solemn day they assemble at the feast, with all their children, sisters, mothers, people of every sex and of every age. There, after much feasting, when the fellowship has grown warm, and the fervour of incestuous lust has grown hot with drunkenness, a dog that has been tied to the chandelier is provoked, by throwing a small piece of offal beyond the length of a line by which he is bound, to rush and spring; and thus the conscious light being overturned and extinguished in the shameless darkness, the connections of abominable lust involve them in the uncertainty of fate... (Octavius 9)

Apart from the seriousness of the blood libel, and the bitter irony that it was an accusation made by majority Christian communities against the Jews who lived in their midst from the high middle ages even to the present day, the private nature of Christian worship, circumscribed by the custom of table-fellowship incited suspicion and fed hatred. No matter how much Christian writers like Tertullian and other could seek to reassure their readers that Christian feasts were just like everybody else’s, a core of unpersuadable anti-Christian bigots remained, and it was their feelings that emerged in the periodic pogroms against Christians in the first two centuries of the Christian era.

At the same time, another set of unpersuadables were emerging. I have already noted Clement of Alexandria's ambivalent attitude to food. As time went on, the ambivalence expressed in his writings became downright hostility. The body became an enemy to be conquered and subjugated by the spirit, and that is the story that we shall take up next week.

FASTING IN ANCIENT CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

When we begin to talk of Christian fasting, it is important to remember Christian origins as a Jewish reform movement. The disciples were Jews; Jesus was a Jew. That means that fasting was built into their lives. Every year, they kept the fast on the Day of Atonement. Individual fasting was also seen as an act of devotion and service to God. When Luke describes the fasting of Simeon and Anna in Chapter 2 of his Gospel, he speaks of it as service to God. Some observant Jews fasted twice every week, seeing fasting and tithing as regular deeds of piety. Jesus, when he sought to prepare himself for his ministry, took himself out into the wilderness for forty days of fasting, reflection and prayer. This forty day withdrawal is the model for Lent and provides the rationale for Christian Lenten fasts. Nevertheless, the community around Jesus appears not to have built fasting any further into their collective lives. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus assumes that people do fast from time to time and instructs those who fast not to boast of it or proclaim it in their appearance:

“When you fast, do not look sullen like the hypocrites, for they make their faces unattractive so that people will see them fasting. I tell you the truth, they have their reward. Matt. 6:16

Nevertheless, it is also clear that his disciples did not necessarily observe weekly fasts. The followers of John the Baptist, who was an ascetic, practiced regular fasts and demanded of Jesus’ own community why they did not do likewise. This story is told in all three synoptic gospels. Mark’s version, which is the earliest, has the question coming from both the disciples of John the Baptist and from the Pharisees (Mk. 2.18), whereas Matthew prefers to have the question asked only by the followers of John (Matt. 11.18) and Luke, by the Pharisees (Lk. 7.33). In all cases, the answer is the same. In Matthew’s words (9.15):

Jesus said to them, “The wedding guests cannot mourn while the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days are coming when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and then they will fast.”

Jesus, then, does not forbid fasting, nor commend it. He sees it as a natural response to a particular context. Indeed, it is worth noting that, on his final evening with his disciples before his arrest, he feasted with them, and while that was followed by Jesus’ own agony of prayer and preparation in Gethsemane, it was an agony that was, at least, relatively well-fed.

In the same way, the earliest Christians, as we noted last week, marked their common life by feasting together, rather than by refraining from food. One possible reason for this is because common feasting is a readier signifier of communal identity than communal fasting since fasting, by its nature is an individual refraining from food. That does not mean, I hasten to add, that there is not such thing as a communal fast. Yom Kippur and Ramadan are ready falsifiers of such a foolish proposition, but both are hallowed by tradition and scripture, and the earliest Christians had neither of these other than those of the Jewish community out of which they emerged.

As time went on, however, fasting came to be viewed as an essential adjunct to prayer on particular occasions. Fasting, in this context, may have served as a means of focusing and enabling prayer. There is no evidence that it was believed to either add merit to the prayer or to the one doing the praying. After he was blinded on the road to Damascus, Saul took no food or drink for three days. That might be because he was simply too traumatized by his experience to take nourishment, or his fasting might have been a response to an intense spiritual crisis. Where we do see fasting in the Book of Acts is at moments of commissioning. When Paul and Barnabas were sent out on the first missionary journey by the Antioch church, Luke tells us that (Acts 13) it was a result of a revelation given to the church after “prayer and fasting”. More fasting and prayer marked the actual commissioning of Paul and Barnabas. There is no clear rationale for fasting here other than as something that occurs alongside prayer. Certainly earlier commissions mentioned in Acts occur without fasting: the new apostle Matthias, commissioned to replace Judas, and the deacons who administer the Jerusalem church, for example (Acts 1, 6). But fasting then becomes a feature of the mission of Paul and Barnabas, both at their commissioning and as they commission others to act as elders in the churches that they plant (Acts 14.23). Perhaps the practices of the Jerusalem community differed substantially from those of the Antioch community and it was Antioch practice that Paul took with him on his missionary journey.

The letters in New Testament- those of Paul and others – which give the best evidence of issues in the life of the early church and questions of practice and devotion, do not mention fasting at all. This is especially odd if one might otherwise expect fasting to play a significant part in the life of the church. It is clear that, for the first generation of Christians, fasting was a practice that was uncontroversial, probably because its practice was routinely considered to be individual and subsidiary to the ministry of prayer.

It is only in the post-apostolic documents, that is the writing that belong to the first generation after the passing of Jesus' disciples, that we begin to find the first routine references to fasting. The *Didache*, a work of the late first century, mentions fasting three times. The first is the most curious. It recommends a fast for one's enemies:

“Bless those that curse you, and pray for your enemies, and fast for those that persecute you. For what credit is it to you if you love those that love you? Do not even the heathen do the same?” But, for your part, “love those that hate you,” and you will have no enemy.”

Here, fasting is seen as adding merit, perhaps as a kind of bargaining chip in a reciprocal relationship with God. At *Didache* 7, the author sees fasting as an appropriate preparation for baptism:

And before the baptism let the baptiser and him who is to be baptised fast, and any others who are able. And thou shalt bid him who is to be baptised to fast one or two days before.

Given the function of baptism as a symbolic rebirth, it is not unreasonable to see here a link between fasting and purification, and it is interesting to note that both the one to be baptized and the one baptizing them are to fast. It is also important to remember that baptism played a critical symbolic role in the entry to the church for every Christian, so fasting here is elevated to a much more dignified and important role than it had played hitherto. Finally, the author of the *Didache* advises that fasts be observed on days different from the days on which Jews customarily fasted, and indeed orders that Christians fast on Wednesdays and Fridays. This certainly suggests that many Christian communities had continued with the practice of bi-weekly fasts, and the author was anxious to differentiate the practices of the two communities.

A document of the same period, but a slightly different context to the *Didache* is the *Shepherd* of Hermas. This text, which seems to have been Italian in origin, and dating to the middle of the second century, begins with five visions. These have been granted after a period of prayer and fasting. Hermas, however, does not leave it there but provides a more explicit context for fasting. The third part of the *Shepherd* is a collection of what is called in the text “Similitudes” or otherwise, ‘parables’. Similitude 5 begins:

1. As I was fasting in a certain mountain and giving thanks to God for all he things that he had done to me, behold I saw the shepherd, who was accustomed to converse with

me, sitting by me and saying to me: What has brought you here so early in the morning? I answered, Sir, today I keep a station. 2. He answered, What is a station? I replied, It is a fast. He said, What is that fast? I answered, I fast, as I have been used to doing. You do not know, he said, what it is to fast to God; nor is this a fast which you fast, profiting nothing with God. 3. Sir, I said, what makes you speak like this? He replied, I speak it, because this is not the true fast which you think that you fast; but I will show you what is a complete fast, and acceptable to God. 4. Pay attention, he said. The Lord does not desire such a needless fast; for by fasting in this manner, you advance nothing in righteousness. 5. But the true fast is this: do nothing wickedly in your life, but serve God with a pure mind, keep his commandments, and walk according to his precepts, nor permit any wicked desire to enter into the mind. 6. But trust in the Lord, so that if you do these things and fear him, and abstain from every evil work, you will live to God. 7. If you will do this, you will perfect a great fast, and one acceptable one to the Lord.

Here, the author rejects devotional fasting as fruitless. To him, genuine fasts are not about refraining from food, but about refraining from wickedness and striving to do the will of God. Such a view is grounded in the gospel accounts, but also recognizes the degree to which regular fasting has found its way into the daily lives of Christians as a routine devotional practice. In reality it is not the fasting itself that the author inveighs against but the fact that it has no essential meaning or merit. The second century texts are quite critical in our understanding of the part that fasting played in early Christian communities, both because they make it evident that ancient Christians routinely fasted, and also that they did so without any clear rationale. Even in theology, nature abhors a vacuum and there were those who were ready to provide a rationale for fasting which bore little relation to the teachings of the Jesus of the canonical gospels or Paul of the canonical letters, but nevertheless provided a narrative for fasting which became pervasive and compelling.

During the second century, the documents that were produced by the Christian communities of the Mediterranean basin all found a place for fasting. It was not at the forefront of their activities, but it was generally viewed as a legitimate act of devotion that amplified the merit of the faster in some particular way. These documents never lose the sense that fasting for its own sake has no value and routine fasting therefore confers no merit. Fasting is always coupled with prayer and generally associated with either preparation for some kind of confrontation with worldly society or as an expression of mourning or repentance. A possible exception to his is in a community of Christians that came to be called called the Encratites. The name comes for

the Greek work *enkrateia* which can be translated as “temperance” or “self-control”. This community, which had its origins in Syria, became, at least in the view of Peter Brown, the locus for an increasing asceticism within Christian communities.

The first actual treatise on fasting by a Christian writer is that of Tertullian. It dates to the early third century, and its principal importance lies in the fact that, at the time of its composition, Tertullian sat outside the Christian mainstream. Tertullian was a North African writer, probably a layman, and a man of profound faith. He became attracted to a group of Christian charismatics now known as Montanists, who had a deep conviction of the direct ministry of the Holy Spirit. Montanus, for whom the group was named, claimed a direct revelation of the Holy Spirit. He also respected and proclaimed similar revelations to two women in his movement: Priscilla and Maximilla. These three practiced fasting and prayer and called upon their followers to do the same in order to receive revelations of the same order as they had. At one point, the Shepherd of Hermas had linked prayer and fasting with revelation. The Montanists, or as they preferred to refer to themselves, the New Prophecy, made this a daily practice and expectation. Tertullian found himself drawn to this group, no doubt attracted by their sincere faith and excited by their teachings. Their exaltation of the Spirit led to an equivalent repression of the body. Whether naturally ascetic, or attracted by their asceticism, Tertullian argued in his own treatise that fasting was more than a simple act of bodily focus and purification. Rather, it was a stepping-stone on the path to salvation, which was the practice of rigorous self-control (*enkrateia*). Tertullian’s view of food is instructive. He argues that it was food that was the cause of the initial fall. Adam, he says, was required to refrain from the fruit of one tree, failed, and thus all Creation fell. For Tertullian, then, fasting is primordial purity; food is a kind of spiritual poison.

In this respect, Tertullian differs, and perhaps deliberately, from the Encratite movement. Regular Encratites located the Fall in sexual sin and believed that the sexual lust of the body was the main enemy to be conquered by the spiritual person. They praised celibacy and exalted virginity. Tatian, the Christian thinker most linked to the Encratite movement, taught that ascetic behavior liberated its practitioners from the demands of the body. He had no especial place for fasting as such, although he excluded both meat and wine from what was acceptable as food. One observer of Tatian’s career was Irenaeus. Irenaeus states that Tatian had come under the influence of some Gnostic Christian thinkers in Rome, most especially Valentinus. While the Gnostic movement generally took many forms, the different Gnostic groups

were united in the conviction that the physical world of flesh was a prison and true freedom was in the divine world of the spirit. Therefore, the demands of the flesh were constant foes to be overcome, since by subduing the flesh, Gnostics were liberated into a nobler and superior salvation.

Asceticism, which might be loosely defined as the repression of physical urges and bodily comfort, was a natural response to this. To return to Tertullian, his own teaching was less obsessed by the sexual urge as a source of wickedness. Indeed, for him, control of the appetite for food was of far greater value since, to him, it was food that was the occasion for the fall, and not any sexual sin. While the two concepts are quite distinct from one another, they are united in the form that they took: an increasingly rigorous asceticism which might have had its origins outside the orthodox mainstream but, during the course of the third century and later, became increasingly common and, indeed, normalized within Christian practice.

It is usually argued that asceticism made its way into the Christian mainstream from its Gnostic origins. This is to misunderstand the nature of Gnosticism and also the intellectual fashion of the time. Although Gnostic teaching held that the material world was a lesser creation, it was not necessarily an evil one. Gnostic practice valued asceticism and its practice was a mark of the Gnostic teacher, but that was as far as it went. There was no sense, for example, that matter was evil or that the desires of the flesh needed to be subjugated. Moreover, Gnostic asceticism was of a pattern with everybody else's. One thing that certainly occurred in the course of the third century was that Plato made a comeback. Lying at the heart of Plato's work is the view that the world in which we live is vain, vague and imperfectly reflective of divine reality. Such a proposition lends itself to the dualist approach to cosmology that draws a sharp distinction between spirit and flesh. This lent itself to a kind of pagan asceticism that we find in the life of Plotinus, Plato's enormously influential re-interpreter, and also in his student, editor and successor, Porphyry who amongst other things, was a militant vegetarian. For classical pagan religion, this was a major development and a reversal of centuries of practice and tradition. I began last week with the conundrum posed by Veronika Grimm of how a religion that began in feasting and celebration could become so concentrated upon the denial of the things of the body. The same question could be asked of intellectual paganism, whose principal champions seem to have abandoned the joyful feasting of sacrificial worship for a life of inner joy and outer self-denial.

Where all this is going is the proposition that asceticism was widespread in

the third century and the practice of self-denial as a worthwhile spiritual exercise crossed religious and sectarian boundaries. We tend to find this difficult to comprehend, since our own culture values and commodifies the pursuit of pleasure. To the ancients, true happiness was found in the freedom that liberation from desire brought, whereas our own culture locates happiness in having and owning, and in the pursuit of pleasure.

Ancient Christians therefore needed to practice an asceticism that could be differentiated from everyone else's asceticism by its rationale. Here is where food came in. Sexual continence, if not actual renunciation, was almost a given of ancient asceticism. It was food and drink where Christians provided their biggest point of distinction between themselves and their rivals. Moreover, it is particularly worth noting that, as the culture of asceticism became more prevalent, one result for Christians was the abandonment of the *agape* feast. By the third century, the communal meal was occasional and informal, rather than routine and liturgical. The Eucharist was still certainly celebrated, but now the taking of the bread and the wine became symbolic for the entire meal. The culture of feasting had retreated; the culture of fasting was on the march.

Clement of Alexandria wrote a treatise on fasting that is, unfortunately, lost, but the sense of it remains. Clement encouraged fasting but ensured that it was linked with prayer and conducted for a particular purpose. Neither Clement, nor his successor in Alexandria, Origen, understood or accepted the self-discipline and sharp control of those outside the Church. As far as they were concerned, their asceticism was in vain and their fasts were futile. Some time in the third century, in both Egypt and Syria, that changed. The rationale for fasting diversified. In an important study of fasting in Patristic literature, the great patristic scholar Herbert Musurillo, argued that there was no single Christian rationale for fasting, but found it used and justified in many contexts. Thus, fasting as a focus for repentance in preparation for baptism; fasting to accompany prayer; fasting as a routine act of personal devotion; all had equal point and purpose. It was Tertullian who marked the change, arguing in his own treatise that the hunger for food was the hangover from Adam's original sin and so instead identified the consumption of food with the fallen state of the world:

"I hold, therefore, that from the very beginning the murderous gullet was to be punished with the torments and penalties of hunger. Even if God had enjoined no preceptive fasts, still, by pointing out the source whence Adam was slain, He who had demonstrated the offense had left to my intelligence the remedies for the offense. Unbidden, I would, in such

ways and at such times as I might have been able, have habitually accounted food as poison, and taken the antidote, hunger..." (On Fasting, 4.104)

To Tertullian, fasting was the proper response to hunger: taming the flesh and its unruly demands was the only way to pursue a proper spiritual path.

I want to conclude this lecture and this series by a reflection of fasting as a feature of early monasticism. Christian monasticism began in Egypt and in Syria, where people could readily withdraw themselves from the world of the living to the deserts that were virtually next door. Much has been said about these early monks and how they functioned as living martyrs, whose lives were given up to God in solitary prayer and contemplation, in a community that venerated martyrdom. Much has likewise been said, and that, erroneously, about their heroic struggles with the desires of the flesh. They certainly did struggle with their own desires but, as Peter Brown has pointed out, those desires were not so much pent-up and repressed sexual desire, but the far more quotidian desire to eat and drink. The ancient eremitic monks ate little, and what they ate was simply to keep them breathing, so their daily lives was marked by the constant, gnawing hunger of the chronically under-nourished. Outsiders saw them as spiritual athletes, uniquely holy and especially close to God. That was the gift of their hunger.

Even though such spiritual heroism was not given to everyone, the monks and holy men of the desert became a kind of Christian aristocracy, speaking without fear to rulers and emperors, giving advice to those who came to them, and providing the same service to the Christian empire that oracles had to its pagan predecessor. The mark of their special merit was their conspicuous fasting, and the marks of their victory over temptation lay in their wasted flesh and deliberate movements. This was valued by the vast mass of society who might have envied the monks their perfection, but were nevertheless unwilling to give up their daily pleasures, the first and most immediate of which lay in the food that they ate and the water and the wine that they drank.