

## Thought for the week.

Food is central to our lives – without it we would get very ill and die. **What** we eat is important too. Our doctors and dentists wouldn't be happy if we were eating sugary snacks all the time, and some of us have to avoid certain foods because of allergies and intolerances. The food we eat can also mark us out as being part of a particular culture or from a particular place. Just think of the age-old question about which order you put the jam and cream on your scone – if you are from Devon you'll put the cream on first then the jam, but if you're from Cornwall then you'll do it the other way around. (If you're from anywhere else you're probably not that bothered!)

**How** we eat our food can also mark us out as being different – do we eat with knives, forks and spoons or use our hands or chopsticks? Do we sit down at a table, on the floor, or on a sofa in front of the TV? Do we eat on our own or with other people? Sometimes it can seem as if there are lots of unwritten rules as to how we eat. Getting them wrong can make us feel very uncomfortable, or perhaps mean we're not invited back. Perhaps you remember the scene in the TV series *Downton Abbey* where the chauffeur is invited in to dine with the family but must be taught how to use the cutlery properly and it turns into a bit of a disaster.

In the Old Testament, many rules were given to the Israelites as to what they could and couldn't eat and how they needed to prepare certain foods. Obeying these rules marked them out as God's chosen people and they were central to Jewish culture. It is likely that Jesus, as a Jew, would have abided by these rules with his disciples. Yet through Jesus' death and resurrection we have been given a new identity. As with any identity, it takes time to work out what that means. The disciples and Early Church had to wrestle with how their identity as followers of Jesus interplayed with their Jewish heritage. Their God had not changed, yet they knew things were different and, as the Gentiles began to also become followers of Jesus, the Church had a cultural dilemma on its hands. Should all followers of Jesus follow Jewish laws and customs, and, if so, did that mean that Gentiles had to become Jewish in order to follow Jesus?

Through this passage, God takes Peter and the Early Church, step by step, through a process of making all things new. Through a vision, which Peter then explains to others, and the Holy Spirit falling upon some Gentiles, God reveals the way for the Church to be. Through Jesus, the old ways have been made new, and salvation is opened up freely to anyone who wants to receive. This was a total cultural change and so there would understandably be many opponents to the idea. Imagine what your reaction would be if everyone in the UK was told to stop using any form of cutlery and that from now on you were only able to eat food with your hands. You'd likely be outraged and have a multitude of questions. I imagine that there were many in the Early Church who felt the same about uncircumcised Gentiles becoming followers of Jesus and their eating of what was previously considered unclean food.

It is perhaps understandable then that God in his compassion and wisdom takes the Jewish Christians on this journey to the new, step by step. In Peter's vision, he sees everything three times and the message was unmistakable. Then there were six witnesses to the Holy Spirit falling on the Gentiles. This was double the number of witnesses normally needed to verify something as true. God was making all things new, liberating people from what were now unnecessary rules, and revealing more of who he is. How can we as a community distinguish between rules that have been put in place to protect us and rules that we need to be liberated from? What is God wanting to make new in our lives today?