

## Sermon Archive 500

Sunday 1 September, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections on the Sense of Taste

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



**Lesson:** Psalm 34: 1-8

**Reflection:** Jamie "tastes and sees"

Jamie Oliver grew up in a pub, where his parents made good, solid English nosh. Jamie helped out in the kitchen from an early age, so got on top of basic English menus. As he became more educated through working in different kitchens, he was exposed to French cuisine, Italian pastas, Asian curries, Middle Eastern surprises. It wasn't long before he developed a real appreciation that different flavours existed - that every culture seemed to have its own approach to food, its own palate of taste.

At the start of the first episode of the latest TV series to air here in Aotearoa New Zealand, this is what he said:

*"Whenever I can, I like to go travelling to get inspiration for new recipes. And one of the areas I love exploring the most is the Mediterranean. So I'm heading off to corners that I've never explored before, to research the fascinating dishes people are making, the surprising ways they build and celebrate flavour, and the brilliant techniques that I can learn from them . . . I want to meet the people who are the very best at making traditional dishes, and those inventing new ones - to come up with new recipes and flavours that can bring us all a bit of "holiday" back home. Cheers to that!"*

One of the unknown corners Jamie explores is a family property on a hilltop on the island of Skopelos. The view of the sea and sky from the balcony of the house is blue. There's a pergola with bright red bougainvillea on it. The sun is shining. A big chunky wooden table has a spread of food on it that's come from the local sea and land - olives, plums, lemons, grapes, pork, goat, fish from the sea. These are the tastes of their home. One of the people at the table is Poppa Giannis. He's 103 years old. Asked to what he attributes his longevity, he replies "everything is healthy. I eat a bit of everything, and also drink wine. And we have no problems".

"No problems" he says. He can't have noticed that the Greek economy has crashed, that for the second year in a row Greece was ranked last among European countries for freedom of the press, that Greece was ranked very high in hate crimes

against asylum seekers, and that the European Commission's "Rule of Law" report downgraded Greece's civic freedoms status from "narrowed" to "obstructed". No problems!

I'm not sure what this means. Maybe it's a negative example of privilege breeding indifference. Or maybe it's a testament to the power of food to create a sanctuary. Or maybe, since he's 103, we ought to leave him to his food and wine - maybe he's done enough work for the world. Here's a wee thought, though, who being less than 103 are still rather more a part of the wider world.

One of the things that Jamie often tells his audience to do, is to taste what you're cooking as you cook it. Tasting means that you can adjust it as you go, making it better. Don't just trust the recipe, but discern how things are going as you "bring it to be".

We hear the psalm saying "O taste and see that the Lord is good". I think, most probably, we take that as a final tasting, a judging of God's completed dish - as if God's work is done. I wonder, though, if we were to take "tasting and seeing" as something of a process by which we join in with the process of what God is making - adding something different or new to what with God is "coming to be". Like if we taste the poverty of our neighbour, or taste a nasty attitude in our community, might we be being called to add something from our own pantry or garden? "O taste, and see that the Lord is good". Not to indulge in what's completed, but further to share in food for tomorrow, a "new twist", as they say.

*Whenever I can, I like to go travelling to get inspiration for new recipes . . . I want to meet the people who are the very best at making traditional dishes, and those inventing new ones - to come up with new recipes and flavours that can bring us all a bit of "holy day" back home. Cheers to that!"*

**Knox Singers:** Ave Verum  
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

**Lesson:** John 6:35, 41-43, 47-51

**Reflection:** Four tastes + 1, +1?

Indeed, as Jamie noted, there are many different styles of cooking around the world, each with its own palate of taste. For a long, long time, as we took to describing the different tastes we came across, we had four different tastes to draw on. We had sweet, we had sour; we had salty and we had bitter. And we felt that using those four categories, we could describe pretty much everything that came to our table. In less happy kitchens, maybe people sometimes used the words "burnt" or "disappointing" - but normally sweet, sour, salty and bitter were enough. The scientists affirmed the legitimacy of the standard four, identifying various parts of the tongue where taste receptors were concentrated

for each.. Science upheld that our language was sufficient to name our "tasting reality".

One day someone ate something new, and none of the four words could describe the taste quite correctly. It wasn't a new taste, of course; it had been experienced for thousands of years in places to which Jamie hadn't yet travelled. It wasn't until 1990 that the International Symposium on Glutamate formally recognised the existence of "umami". And it wasn't until 16 more years had passed that neuro-scientists from the University of Miami were able to identify taste buds that confirmed umami as the fifth legitimate taste. This, of course, makes me wonder whether there may be other things that we taste, but for which we yet have to develop a language to describe. Maybe some things are either just so subtle, or so all-pervasive, that we haven't yet recognised them as things that need describing. "What water?" asks the fish.

Jesus seems to be talking to his audience about bread - but they're not understanding him. He says "I am the bread of life", but it causes them to complain.

"**Don't** complain", he says. He then reminds them of the "heavenly bread" their ancestors found. Why was it heavenly? Did anyone see it coming from heaven? Was it not always actually found on the ground? Yet it sustained them in a way that caused them to call it "heavenly". It's the best their language could do. And now he's talking about another kind of bread - bread by which, when they eat it, won't die, like their ancestors died. No, this is living bread, and will cause its eaters to live.

Is he describing something so subtle in the world that they haven't yet realised it to name it? Or is it something so all-pervasive that language is overwhelmed? Yes, we know Jesus was speaking in metaphors - but what was he trying to name? How do we describe its taste? Bread of the world, in mercy broken.

**Hymn**: Bread of the world

**Lesson**: Isaiah 25: 6-9

**Reflection**: A feast of plenty for all people

Indeed, it's a vision of a wonderful feast - rich food filled with marrow, and well-aged wines, cups running over. And **all** the nations are present - the doors are shut to no one. Such is the vision of God for creation restored.

Well, until the restoration, here are five little scraps of "food info":

**First scrap** - Monitoring food prices at supermarkets across the motu, Statistics New Zealand noted that "in the 12 months to June 2024, prices for fruit and vegetables, and meat, poultry and fish fell 16.1 percent and 1.4 percent respectively. The decrease for fruit and vegetable prices is the largest recorded since the series began, as prices fell from the record-high level in June 2023,".

This confused me until Stats further noted that in the 12 months to June 2024 all other broad food groups had increased in price.

**Second scrap:** In 2023, in Ōtautahi Christchurch, the Anglican City Mission provided **762,600** meals.

**Third scrap:** Changes to the way that the "food in schools" programme is run should save tax-payers \$107 million per annum. There is some debate about whether the changes involve a decrease in nutritional value.

**Fourth scrap:** while it was long a practice for kings, queens and other politically important people to have tasters taste their food (in order to detect any fast acting poisons that may have been inveigled in by would-be assassins), it's only since 2014 that it went on record that one of Vladimir Putin's security staff is a food taster. Interestingly, a food taster was also employed by Barrack Obama.

**Fifth scrap:** asked by Matthew for comments about the kitchen demeanour of famous chef, Gordon Ramsay, an ex-chef said that shouting and rudeness have no place within a kitchen. Shouting and rudeness, so the ex-chef opines, indicates that Gordon hasn't given sufficient care to preparing his staff for their important work, and supporting them in their doing of it. It is noted that in no other work place would such behaviour be tolerated. Matthew notes, further, that food is meant to be about bringing people together - even "all the nations" at a rich and wonderful sharing of life.

-ooOoo-

We give thanks to God for the gift of food, and for the sense of taste by which we enjoy it. We give thanks for the nourishment, and the conviviality we have known around the tables at which we have found welcome. We give thanks for recipes that are either handed down by grandma, or found exciting and new on the internet. And we give thanks for a vision for all the nations gathered at the feast of a world made new.

Our prayers for ourselves and others . . .

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