



THINKING ABOUT VEGETARIANISM

by The Revd Hugh Broadbent

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Christians become vegetarian for a wide variety of reasons. Some believe it is healthier, that animal fats, for example, can clog up their arteries. Others maintain that a vegetarian diet accords well with a simpler lifestyle; a number of monastic orders are inclined towards vegetarianism for this reason. And others again view it as a moral imperative in caring for their fellow human beings. Animals are a relatively inefficient source of protein, and if we are serious about feeding a rapidly growing world population, meat is a luxury we simply cannot afford.

This booklet focuses on vegetarianism in relation to animal welfare, and asks whether those who care about their fellow creatures should, as far as possible, refrain from eating meat or products associated with animal cruelty.

Many Christians maintain that meat-eating is not only natural and healthy but God-ordained, and regard vegetarians as slightly 'odd'. They quote long-standing theological arguments in support of their position:

- Human beings, they argue, are created in the 'image' of God (Genesis 1:26-27) and are different from other animals. They have rational 'souls' (e.g. Matthew 10:28) and are morally responsible in ways that animals clearly are not. In addition to all this, the latter do not have the same level of self-awareness as humans, so when they are transported in cramped and uncomfortable conditions or

slaughtered in an abattoir, they do not suffer or experience pain to the same degree as we would. We must beware of superimposing onto animals our own human mode of experience.

- The Western Church has for centuries followed the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas believed that there is a hierarchical order within Creation, ranging from the angels at the top down to the lowest species of animal or insect at the bottom. The lower orders exist, in his view, for the sake of the higher orders, and animals therefore exist for the sake of human beings. This is what is signified by the 'dominion' or 'rule' given to Adam by God (Genesis 1:28). Animals have been created for human use, and one such use is as food.
- God's covenant with Noah expressly permits the killing of animals for food (Genesis 9:1-3)

and Jesus himself can be seen to have assisted his disciples in their work of catching fish (Luke 5:1-7; John 21:1-14). On the night before he was crucified he ate the Passover meal, which traditionally included roast lamb, (Matthew 26:17-25; Mark 14:12-21; Luke 22:7-16; John 13:21-30).

- St. Peter, one of the leaders of the Early Church, had a vision of a sheet being lowered from heaven with all kinds of creatures on it, and a voice telling him to kill and eat (Acts 10:9-16).
- St. Paul described vegetarians in one of his letters as among those 'whose faith is weak' (Romans 14:2). So although their viewpoint should be tolerated out of Christian charity, it should not merit any serious consideration.

Arguments such as these are frequently rehearsed by meat-eaters, but in recent years they have increasingly been challenged:

- St. Thomas Aquinas' teaching about the place of animals within the hierarchy of Creation owes more to Aristotle and the Greek philosophers than to the Bible. The 'dominion' or 'rule' mentioned in Genesis Chapter One is not that of a tyrant who exploits his subjects in whatever way he chooses. It is rule of a good and loving God, revealed supremely in Jesus, the humble Servant-King (Mark 10:42-45).

Being in the 'image of God' has more to do with duty and service than with privilege.

The first Creation story in Genesis chapter one affirms the intrinsic goodness of every living creature in the eyes of God prior to, and apart from, the existence of humans (Genesis 1:20-21) and Jesus speaks of the fate of even the tiniest sparrow being of concern to its Maker (Luke 12:6). The notion that living creatures only exist for the benefit of human beings is patently absurd. Dinosaurs lived and died long before human beings arrived on the scene, and there are creatures in the depths of the oceans and jungles of whose existence we are barely aware.

- Human beings created in the 'image' of God are different from other animals. But in terms of suffering this difference is not as great as is often imagined, and it is increasingly evident that animals can, for example, suffer considerable fear and anxiety as well as physical pain.

Modern methods of intensive farming and mass-slaughter have added significantly to the suffering which we inflict upon them. The horrific way in which many farm animals are now reared, kept, transported and slaughtered are well-documented by organizations like Compassion in World Farming. Cows on factory farms, for example, are worked so hard that

their life-expectancy is reduced by more than two-thirds, and many never see the light of day or have the opportunity to graze in a grassy field.

Growing numbers of people are drawn these days towards vegetarianism, not necessarily because they are against meat-eating per se, but because they are appalled by the in-built cruelty of factory farming, and by the way in which the drive for efficiency and cheap food has led to respect for animals and concern for their welfare being almost completely ignored. Vegetarians wanting to disassociate themselves from the horrors of factory farming, often go even further and move towards an increasingly vegan diet (refraining from eggs and dairy products).

- The Covenant between God and Noah (Genesis 9), which allows the killing of animals for food, need not replace or invalidate the original vegetarian ideal described in Genesis Chapter One (verses 29-30). Within the Bible there is an important strand of teaching which regards the Covenant with Noah as only a temporary concession, an expression of God's permissive Will rather than his ultimate Will. The prophet Isaiah, for example, has a vision of universal peace which clearly echoes the peace and harmony of the Garden of Eden described in Genesis

Chapter One:

“The wolf shall lie down with the lamb... They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain”. (Isaiah 11:6-9)

Few of us would accept this prophecy as a literal prediction relating to our

present world. But it does indicate the direction in which we should be moving, as we look towards God's final redemption of the whole created order (Rom.8:20-21). Jesus as the Second Adam inaugurated a new, redeemed humanity, and those who are in Christ should be looking beyond the permissive covenant with Noah to the ultimate vision of peace and harmony as expressed by Isaiah.

- What has been the norm in the past, or what is the norm at the present, is not necessarily what ought to be the norm in the future. Jesus held a dynamic view of 'right' and 'wrong'. He spoke of 'kairos', a 'right time' for certain changes and developments (e.g. Mark 1:15).

Under the influence of Jesus' teaching and ministry, it is interesting to note how quickly the Early Church abandoned certain Jewish laws and observances, (e.g. those concerning clean and unclean food). Christians at that time clearly felt that, in the light of their experience of God's all-embracing love and their mission

to the wider non-Jewish world, these requirements needed be laid to one side. In more recent times Wilberforce and the great Christian reformers of the 19th century were led by similar considerations to view the Old Testament laws and practices relating to slavery as having been superseded by the vision of an all-inclusive fellowship in which there was 'neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female' (Gal.3:28). For them the time had come to abolish the slave trade and move forward.

If we believe that God's Spirit of truth continues to guide and challenge his Church (John 16:13), we must be open to further changes and developments in the future. Jesus almost certainly ate meat, but many would argue that, in the light of the biblical vision of cosmic redemption and universal peace, and with a growing understanding of our solidarity with the animal kingdom, the 'right time' has come for us to tackle this particular issue and to reassess our meat-eating habits.

- St. Peter's vision in Acts 10 takes for granted a killing, meat-eating culture. But whilst it assumes that we can kill (out of necessity), it does not prove that we ought to kill (regardless of whether the situation demands it or not). If Christians, for example, found themselves in a situation akin to that of the survivors of the famous plane crash in the

Andes, where the only food available to them is the meat from the dead passengers, many would feel that they could quite legitimately eat this meat. They might even quote the words from St. Peter's vision, 'Do not call anything impure that God has called clean'. But their doing so would not lead them to conclude that, when they found themselves in more normal circumstances, they ought to eat human flesh as a matter of routine!

If we find ourselves stranded on an iceberg, it might well be that the only food available to us is penguins or other living creatures. But in our modern western society, the choice of food available to us is vast and there is no necessity to eat meat in order to survive or remain healthy.

- The Bible speaks of God's saving work in Christ as including the whole created order and not just human beings (Romans 8:19-21; Colossians 1:19-20). If we are serious about co-operating with God's purposes, we need to take a far greater interest than we do at present in the impact that our eating habits have upon our fellow creatures in the wild.

The rapid growth in demand for meat both in the western world and in developing countries is being met by a dramatic rise in global intensive farming. The latter not only causes unacceptable

levels of cruelty and suffering, but also has a seriously detrimental effect upon the habitat of creatures in the wild. Vast areas of countryside are being set aside to grow high energy grain required by the high-yield livestock on these farms and this development inevitably leads to deforestation. A third of the world's entire cereal harvest, 90 per cent of its soya meal, and up to 30 per cent of the global fish catch are, according to Compassion in World Farming, used to this end. Lakes and rivers are also being polluted with effluent from some of these farms. Meat is an inefficient source of protein and its inefficiency has serious implications for wildlife habitats.

- When St. Paul describes vegetarians in Romans 14 as 'those whose faith is weak', it is important to note the context in which he makes these comments. The vegetarian Christians were concerned that meat sold in the marketplace had been offered to idols, and that to eat it might be tantamount to condoning idol-worship (c.f. 1 Corinthians 8: 4-8). The motives underlying their actions were quite different to those of modern-day vegetarians.

However, St. Paul does make one relevant point. He emphasises the importance of conscience. Different Christians, he argues,

will on occasions arrive at different conclusions. That is to be expected. It is part of our developing understanding of the Will of God. On the subject of meat offered to idols he comments,

"Therefore let us stop passing judgement on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling-block or obstacle in your brother's way. As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards it as unclean, then for him it is unclean".

(Romans 14:13-14)

Christians must learn to respect one another's convictions, even when their differences are painful.

We are all on a journey into a deeper communion with God and it is vital that each of us prayerfully considers what might be the next step that we should take. To this end, readers may wish by way of conclusion to ask themselves three simple questions:

What do I need in the way of food in order to enjoy a healthy diet?

What diet should I adopt to minimize my involvement in the suffering of animals within the food industry?

What practical steps might I take to reduce the impact that my diet has upon the environment and animals living in the wild?

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