

**James 1:17-27**

<sup>17</sup>Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. <sup>18</sup>In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

<sup>19</sup>You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; <sup>20</sup>for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. <sup>21</sup>Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. <sup>22</sup>But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. <sup>23</sup>For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; <sup>24</sup>for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. <sup>25</sup>But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. <sup>26</sup>If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup>Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

**Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9**

<sup>4</sup>So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. <sup>2</sup>You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you. <sup>6</sup>You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!" <sup>7</sup>For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? <sup>8</sup>And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? <sup>9</sup>But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children—

**Mark 7.1-8, 14-15, 21-23** (*omitted verses in italics*)

**The Tradition of the Elders**

<sup>7</sup>Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, <sup>2</sup>they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. <sup>3</sup>(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; <sup>4</sup>and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) <sup>5</sup>So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?' <sup>6</sup>He said to them, 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; <sup>7</sup>in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines."

<sup>8</sup>You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.'

14 Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: <sup>15</sup>there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.'

<sup>21</sup>For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, <sup>22</sup>adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. <sup>23</sup>All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'

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*There are no food laws in Christianity. It is a religion not based on rules, but rooted in love.*

Have you heard of the 'Zoe' -food app? Zoe is a personalised nutrition programme, which aims to improve gut and metabolic health. It was started by a professor of genetic epidemiology at Kings College, London, with two colleagues. According to the Guardian newspaper last November, more than 130,000 people had signed up to the Zoe app since its launch in April 2022. My husband is one of them. He has type 2 diabetes which he controls through diet and exercise. The Zoe programme was recommended to him, and it has made a huge difference. He says 'my experience of it is that when I pay attention to what I eat and drink according to the guidance that they provide I feel much better in myself, not just physically. I just feel much better in myself, so there is a connection between how I am and what I eat. As a diabetic, one of the things it's done, it has got me into new ways of thinking and behaving about what I eat. It has sort of broken through decades of habits in ways that I have found revitalising and life giving'.

Ever since I have been aware of Zoe, I have been struck that the app is named after the Greek word for 'life' -zoe - which Jesus uses frequently to talk about himself in John's gospel. Looking into the background of the app, I discovered that one of the app's three founding members is Greek.

On their website, they say:

'ZOE means 'life' in Greek and we're committed to helping people live to their fullest.'

We are our bodies! And there is a close link between our bodies and our spirit. We live in a culture where people pay a lot of attention to their bodies. Our affluent lifestyles, combined with the marketing aims of the food industries, for many result in eating and life-style habits which can lead to poor health. This has led to the development of an app like Zoe, which makes the connection between what we eat and life, living to the fullest.

Our Scriptures are concerned with living to the fullest, and food features a great deal, in both, the Old and the New Testament.

The giving of the law in Deuteronomy which we have in our first reading this morning or the passage from the letter of James remind us of this. Scriptures recognise that we need the development of habits that enable us to live well in God's creation, which includes how we live physically, to honour ourselves, who we are in our bodies, to flourish in the ways that God has intended for us.

Christianity in contrast to Judaism and Islam does not have any food laws. Our gospel reading this morning is from Mark, chapter 7, and is about the disciples eating without washing their hands. The reading oddly omits verse 19, in which Mark states: 'thus Jesus declared all foods clean'. Christianity has no food laws; it is a religion that is not based on rules, but is rooted in love, our response to God's love for us.

In that gospel reading, when the Pharisees and scribes are criticising the eating habits of Jesus' disciples, accusing them of not observing the traditions of their elders, Jesus' focus is on the human heart as the source of our intentions and actions. He does not dispute the validity of commandments and traditions, but what matters is their impact on people's lives and relationships, with each other and with God. We can see that Jesus deeply cares about the physical existence of the people around him, he shows how important eating together is; the fact that he feeds the 5000; meets with people over meals, heals people whenever they come and ask to be made well, shows how much food and the body matter.

Although in Christianity we don't have any food laws, Jesus and our Christian tradition has always known the importance of paying attention to the body, traditions and spiritual practises, including the practice of fasting, in order to live well in our bodies.

In fact, for us Christians, the central act of worship is the Eucharist, a meal – and for the early Christians to gather round a meal in remembrance of Jesus was absolutely formative. A church 'ekklesia' was an assembly at a meal, where scriptures were read, psalms and hymns were sung, but the important part was that food was being shared; and this included a loaf of bread which was blessed and broken up into pieces and given to each member in the assembly. Then a cup of wine was shared fruit of the vine a

symbol of grace and abundance. The bread and the wine, then and for us now, a meal carrying Jesus' presence.

Later on, it was St Paul who articulated the insight that those who are partaking of the body and blood of Christ **are** collectively 'the body of Christ', here on earth called to share the love of Christ with those around them.

And so, every time when we celebrate the Eucharist and at the distribution of communion come forward with outstretched hands to receive the bread of life and the wine of salvation, we are reminded how physical hunger and spiritual hunger are connected. Our bodies matter, we are our bodies.

Bishop Erik Varden, in a book on chastity, writes about the idea that our bodies are immortal. He says, though: 'the thought of the body's immortality is widely met with ridicule'. He goes on to say 'For all our body consciousness, we are keen when the time comes, to leave our bodies behind.' But, he explains, 'the body does ... point beyond itself. It carries a hunger, not just for sensual satisfaction, but for eternity.'

Jesus was God come down to earth, to share our human existence in a human body and show us that our calling, too, is to know ourselves as embodied children of God, loved and precious. Our calling, too, is to live in God – abide with the Father and the Son- and that life for us begins here on earth, as we are reminded each time we celebrate the Eucharist and receive the body and blood of Christ. It is an invitation to honour our bodies -and one another – and, at the same time, to feed our spiritual lives, our knowledge and awareness that our lives are held in existence in God. Food reminds us of our mortality. Jesus the bread of life reminds us of our immortality and enables us to accept our mortality and let go into God, entrusting our mortal bodies to God's purposes.

I think it's wonderful that the food app which uses the latest scientific nutritional knowledge to look after our bodies, for Christians connects us with the meaning of life, Zoe, fullness of life in Christ. Amen.